

## THE COMPASS

Phoenix, Arizona

Wednesday, January 11, 2006

### *Temper, Temper! Part 2*

## **The Fan on the Fire Truck**

Teaching Pastor Doug Brendel

There is no question as to what is going to happen if a house catches on fire and someone calls the fire department.

Actually, we call it the fire department, but it's really the anti-fire department.

Anyway — you're going to hear sirens, and up pulls a fire truck.

We call it a fire truck, but actually it's an anti-fire truck.

Anyway — the firefighters pile off the truck — we used to call them firemen, but they were actually anti-firemen, and then women started fighting fires alongside the men, so now we call them firefighters — and these firefighters, according to their extensive training, move into a series of procedures designed to put out the fire.

First and most important, of course, one of them will climb up on top of the fire truck, where there's a huge fan, and this firefighter will point the fan at the fire, and turn it on.

The massive engine in the fire truck will drive this huge fan to incredible speeds, generating a tremendous wind, which blows out the fire.

We're all familiar with this process, at least from television and the movies.

Right?

Of course not. There is no fan on a fire truck. There are hoses on a fire truck.

It's called a fire hose, but it ought to be called an anti-fire hose.

The firefighters hook the hoses into fire hydrants — we call them fire hydrants, but again, they ought to be called anti-fire hydrants — and they spray water on the fire.

If they were to fan the fire, the fire would spread. It would grow.

To kill a fire, you wet it down.

Do you know why this is? Let me give you a teeny little science lesson.

Fire is a produced by a chemical chain reaction between three components: fuel, oxygen, and heat.

This may seem strange, because we think of a fire as producing heat.

But in fact, to start a fire, you have to have heat — a spark or something to ignite the fuel and the oxygen.

There has to be heat at the interface between the fuel and the oxygen; otherwise you have no fire.

So how do you put a fire out? You take away any one of the three components.

If the fire runs out of fuel, the fire goes out.

But if the forest is on fire, the forest is the fuel; or if your house is burning, your house is

the fuel — so you don't want to just let the fire consume all the fuel.

Or if the heat component disappears, the fire will go out.

Here again, this might seem strange — but it's true.

Even when you blow out a candle, it's not the air that extinguishes the flame.

It's the sudden reduction in heat, at that specific place where the fuel and the oxygen are coming in contact with each other.

Suddenly there's no longer enough heat to sustain the chemical chain reaction between the fuel and the oxygen.

This is why firefighters use water.

It's not just that if you submerge something in water, you cut off its oxygen.

It's also that water absorbs heat like crazy — 28 times faster than oxygen does.

Something is burning, you throw water on it, and in two seconds the temperature of the fuel — the wood, the fabric, whatever — has dropped like crazy.

Even if you don't get enough water onto the fuel to choke off the oxygen, if you get the temperature down enough, the chemical chain reaction is broken.

A fire will go out because of a lack of heat just as surely as it will go out because of a lack of oxygen.

But then, third option, the fire will go out if the oxygen indeed disappears.

But firefighters will tell you that this is the most difficult of the three components to eliminate.

Oxygen is everywhere.

You can bury a small fire with sand, choking off the oxygen supply — but you can't very easily bury a burning house or a forest fire with sand.

Now I would say that anger is a lot like a fire.

It has three components.

First, I've got fuel — something to burn — that would be *me*.

I am made of flammable substances.

(My mind is like wood — hence the term *blockhead*. Then there's the fabric of my emotions. And so forth. It's all stuff that can burn.)

Then somebody says or does something I don't like.

This is the spark. The ignition. The heat is on!

And thirdly, there is oxygen. Words. I fill my lungs with righteous indignation, and out comes a jet stream of words.

I am snorting — wheezing — yelping — yapping — barking — squealing — shrieking — howling — yammering — or maybe I'm just muttering, grumbling, moaning, whining, whimpering.

But in any case, I am providing the oxygen, man.

I got a head full of fuel, somebody made it hot, and now I'm fanning the flame.

I'm venting.

Venting is popular these days.

People say if you're angry, don't keep it in; you gotta vent!

You gotta get the anger out.

Or we put it even more harmlessly: “I’m just processing.”

“I process by verbalizing.”

And this is understandable. A lot of people are wired this way.

We don’t just sit and think about something. We talk about something.

If we’re upset, we chew through that issue verbally — out loud.

Many of us would say, Hey, quite frankly, it is not realistic for me to process problem-situations without verbalizing.

Cool. Process away. Verbalize.

But as I process, as I verbalize, I need to keep in mind that my words are oxygen.

I’m not cooling the fire. I’m fanning the fire.

The Bible talks about people who prefer to process out loud. It uses a different analogy: instead of oxygen, it talks about words as *food*.

**Proverbs 18:20,21** says **From the fruit of his mouth a man’s stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied.** [We might put it this way: You eat what you say.] **The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.**

“Those who love it” refers to people who like talking — they prefer to process verbally — they’re comfortable with that approach.

This is not a put-down of verbal people — thank God, since I am one!

It’s just a matter of fact, a plain and simple component of God’s design of people and the universe:

When I vent, I’m blowing oxygen on the fire of my anger.

This is why **Proverbs 29:11** says, **“A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”**

Frankly, when I’m angry and I vent my anger with words, I’m not actually “processing” my situation.

You know what I’m really doing?

First, I’m rehearsing the wrongdoing and the results of the wrongdoing.

I’m reciting the sin, reviewing the pain — and as I do, I’m digging it like grooves in my brain, in my emotions.

Second, I’m generally also trying to get someone else to agree with me about how bad that person was to me.

I’m running them down, and I’m recruiting you to join me in my low opinion of them.

And third, in many cases, I’m calculating how to get revenge. How to hit back.

This is why **Ephesians 4:29** in the Bible says, **“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”**

See, it would be different if my venting was full of phrases like “Oh, God, that person who hurt me is clearly in pain; they obviously need you in their life! God, will you please bless that person, and fill them with your love!”

That would be healthier — but then it wouldn’t be venting.

Typically, when I vent, it's about rehearsal, and recruitment, and revenge.

\* \* \*

But something has to be done.

If I'm not going to vent, I will need some other strategy for dealing with the forest fire of my anger.

You can't just look the other way and hope a forest fire somehow lays off.

And I can't just look the other way and hope my anger somehow recedes.

My anger has to be dealt with.

I need to call some kind of anti-fire department about my fire.

I need some kind of anti-fire truck to come screaming into my life.

I need some kind of anti-firemen to hook up their anti-fire hoses to some kind of anti-fire hydrant and pour some kind of anti-fire on the fire of my anger.

It is going to be a big, difficult job, because anger is a major part of my life — and look at the complications.

I can't cut off its fuel supply. I'm the fuel! As long as I'm alive, my heart and my mind will be flammable.

And I can't keep from getting hot. There will always be someone or something to get me heated up, to spark my anger.

But here the good news: I can fight the fire.

I can starve it. Suffocate it. *Cut off its air supply.*

I can stop venting — and instead, put something on the fire that will bring the temperature down, choke off the oxygen, and interrupt the combustion.

What can I pour on the fire of my anger?

What is the magical liquid that will douse the forest fire raging inside my head?

It's something called *empathy*.

Empathy.

Empathy is the anti-fire.

\* \* \*

Now empathy is not the same as sympathy.

Sympathy will not put out a fire.

Sympathy is a feeling. It's based on sadness. It's a feeling of sorrow.

When I'm angry with you, if I'm a very, very holy and righteous person, I may actually feel sorry for you.

But that feeling won't go very far toward quenching my anger. It's just another feeling.

Sympathy is passive.

But empathy is *power*. It's active.

Empathy is the power to understand someone else's feelings.

It's the power to relate to that person, human to human.

It's the power to imagine myself walking in that person's shoes.

It's crucial for me to understand the power of empathy because it takes power to

replace anger. It takes some kind of force.  
 If I'm angry at you and I try to be a "good boy" and stop being angry — if I just say to myself, over and over, "I will not be angry; I will not be angry" — I may scoop out a place where the anger was, but anger will tend to re-fill that vacuum.  
 I have to put something positive in the negative space.

**Colossians 3:8-10** in the Bible talks about this, not in terms of putting out a fire — but to help us get the concept, the Scriptures put it in terms of changing clothes.  
 It says **"you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips."**

The phrase *rid yourselves* was originally the ancient Greek word *apotitheemi* — which can also be translated *cast off* or *lay aside* or *put away*.

And in the very next sentence, it talks about how **"you have taken off your old self with its practices."**

Here the original word for *taken off* is *apekduomai* — which is also translated *put off*. These are negative terms — I'm taking off the anger, like a suit of clothes.

But then, after I've *put off* the anger and the other junk, the next line talks about how I **"put on the new self."**

*Put on* is the Greek word *enduo* — it's the word for getting dressed; clothing yourself. It's the word you would use if you were talking about a king or queen *arrayed* in all their splendor.

So what is this *new self* that I'm *putting on*?

What does it do? What does it look like?

The Bible goes on, in the very next line, to give us a description of this amazing new suit of clothes.

This is not a static suit of clothes. In the words of Scripture, it's something **"renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."**

In other words, I'm going to come away from this process with a different mindset — *renewed in knowledge* — and I'm going to wind up looking more like what God originally designed me to look like than what I've come to look like.

Less like Doug, in his natural, angry state — more like Jesus, supernaturally compassionate.

The Bible actually gives us a pretty specific description here:

**Colossians 3:**

**12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.**

**13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**

**14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.**

**15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.**

So I wind up with peace? I wind up with a grateful heart? Awesome. Beats this recurring anger I'm feeling any day!

But how do I get there?

What's Step 1?

What kind of power is going to change my perspective so dramatically?

Empathy.

Empathy is a force — and you might say, empathy is *wet*.

It's the anti-fire. It's the anti-anger.

Empathy puts out anger the way water puts out fire.

\* \* \*

How does empathy happen?

If I want to deal with my anger, how do I get empathy — the anti-fire?

How is this going to work?

Well, if I want to start a fire, it's easiest if I start with a spark, for heat — and if I want to put out a fire, it's easiest if I start with a *splurp* of water.

You're holding the garden hose, you turn the spigot, you wait a second, and then — *splurp!* Water comes out.

When someone has made me mad, and I'm burning hot, I need a *splurp* of empathy to get me started.

Think of it this way: I'm holding my head like a garden hose — or like I've got a headache.

And I turn the spigot — this is the process of saying to myself *How completely will I go to God in this situation?*

And a second or two later, something *splurps* out of that hose.

If I've turned the spigot and asked God to give me something for the moment, I suddenly get a moment of liquid realization.

A moment where I recognize — just fleetingly; this isn't a master's thesis, it's just a little snapshot that my brain takes — there's a moment where I recognize that the person who is making me angry is *like me*.

This person is not beneath me — he's not the scum I feel he is.

He's not above me — I shouldn't set a higher standard for him than I have for myself.

He's not the defendant in a court case, where I'm the judge and jury.

I can't judge him.

I can't punish him.

Not legitimately.

Because he's like me. I'm like him. We're more on the same level than not.

The first *splurp* of empathy to come through the emotional fire hose says: *Psst! Doug! Look in the mirror!*

And I have this moment of realization:

He made me mad in this case, but then I've made a lot of people mad myself, over the course of my lifetime.

He was stupid in this way, but I've been stupid in other ways.

He was mean-spirited today, but I've been mean-spirited on other days.

He was ignorant today — insensitive, had no idea how he was coming across — but I've been at least that much of an ignoramus on many, many occasions in the past.

When the whole of humanity lines up for the Hall of Shame Academy Awards, I'm going

to be able to lean over and look to my left and my right and find him somewhere in the lineup — but when I straighten back up, I realize: Hey! I'm in this line too. The guy who made me angry is — more than I want to admit — pretty much like me.

This is the first *splurp* of empathy that comes out of the hose.

And if I go with it — if I don't run to the spigot and turn off the flow — if I acknowledge my own imperfections, and filter the other guy's imperfections through my own — then I will find myself beginning to feel differently.

I'll change.

Instead of burning hot, I'll find myself cooling down.

The fire of my anger will not keep consuming me — it will cool down. Flicker out. Maybe even die.

This is not a new strategy I just invented. This has been part of the way God designed human beings from the beginning.

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul was trying to keep people in the Turkish province of Galatia from destroying each other with bickering and judgmental attitudes.

As part of his advice, he talked about what to do when someone is clearly in the wrong.

This is not someone who you just had a misunderstanding with. Paul paints the picture of someone who does something truly sinful, and covers it up, and then gets caught at it.

And of course, Paul says the good Christian response would be to “**restore**” the sinner, and do it “**gently**” (**Galatians 6:1-4**).

But then he adds this word of caution: “**But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.**”

Sure, he says, “**Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ**” — but then he immediately adds: “**If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions....**”

He's talking about how, when I'm having what feels like a real spiritually successful day, I'm still very, very much like the next guy in line who's in more of what we might call a sinful phase.

And when I'm failing — when I'm sinning, when I'm doing wrong — I sure don't want judgment. I want mercy.

I need someone to understand my feelings, and treat me accordingly — not according to what I deserve.

\* \* \*

Now, I'm not naturally like Jesus.

I am a naturally angry person.

I see injustice. I see error. I see how things ought to be, and how people are failing to do what needs to be done.

But I have also found, over the course of my lifetime, that anger is exhausting.

It wears me down. It tires me out.

And it doesn't produce much of value. It's not very constructive.

So it's not worth the energy it takes.

The philosopher Frederick Buechner says, of all of what are traditionally called the “Seven Deadly Sins,” “anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

I know whereof he speaks.

I finally came to a place in my life where I urgently wanted a different way of thinking and living and interacting with people, because I was just weary of the anger treadmill.

I remember it very clearly: it was the first week of November in 1997.

For me, empathy made the difference.

Dr. Avery D. Weisman, professor emeritus of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, wrote a book called *The Coping Capacity*, and in it he says that empathy is more than a “different way of seeing things”; it’s really “an authentic desire to see the world through another person’s eyes.”

I know what that kind of desire feels like, because I wanted to escape the angry heat of my forest fire.

But here’s what else I discovered — and I think you’ll find this to be true as well, if you decide you want to get a handle on your anger.

Just like with most of the stuff in God’s design for life, this does not happen automatically; it will have to be a conscious decision on my part.

God won’t trick me into have empathy for someone, and he won’t force me to have empathy for someone.

I have to decide this.

And — empathy doesn’t happen easily or quickly.

This is going to have to be — first of all — a deliberate and repetitive action on my part.

In other words — again, like most of the stuff in God’s design for my life — this will come about through *training*.

Deciding it every day, and doing it every day, and when I drop the ball, picking it back up the next day and starting in again — just like an athlete training for the Olympics.

I can skip a day, I can go with anger instead of empathy for a day, and God doesn’t love me any less — but my training suffers.

I get a bit weaker spiritually; I move a bit further from God’s ideal, a bit further away from God’s design for my life.

Then when I get back into training after a day or two off, I start getting stronger again. Start moving toward my divine potential again.

It’s harder at first, because I’ve been out of training for however long; but I get stronger the longer I do it.

One writer suggests that changing any behavior, especially the anger response, requires (1) preparation; developing a conscious plan of action for change — then (2) action; taking specific steps, actually doing a different behavior — and

finally (3) maintenance; repeating the new behavior until it becomes habitual, which this writer says will probably take about six months.

Well, I can tell you I've never gone six months without exploding in anger about something.

I just have to keep going back to it. Picking up my training again.

Reminding myself how detrimental my anger is. How destructive it is.

How it complicates my relationships.

I've read that two-thirds of cigarette smokers who try to quit smoking relapse within three months; 72% of alcoholics who graduate from a treatment program resume drinking within six months.

The obese may try one diet, then another diet, then another — but often wind up heavier than when they started.

Some people don't succeed at changing their behavior because they don't accept the fact that training takes time.

Training takes repetition. It takes starting over when you drop the ball, rather than giving up the game.

Changing my behavior also requires — secondly — serious ongoing examination and measurement of my progress.

I have to be willing to look at myself in the mirror and assess my anger issues honestly.

How did I do today?

I have to give my wife and kids and friends permission to observe and comment on what they observe.

And — thirdly — I need to give myself credit for minor improvements, because this doesn't happen all at once.

It happens incrementally.

It takes time to put out a fire — and after you get one fire out, another one starts somewhere else.

This is the road I started down in earnest in November of '97.

By turning on a flow of empathy — consciously looking at people as *similar* to me instead of *different* from me — I was able to start tamping down my anger.

Didn't happen all at once. Wasn't automatically successful every time. I'm still not.

But life's better now — because of empathy.

After these years of training, I can more often manage my rage responses.

Sometimes I can bypass rage altogether.

My teenagers will tell you I'm a failure at this, but they don't realize how many times I decide *not* to freak out!

I've found that empathy has to be sought out.

**1 Timothy 6:11** says I have to “*pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.*”

I have to work at it. But it's worth it.

You know, Jesus demonstrated this proactive orientation to selflessness, to show us the ropes.

He didn't come to earth and boss people around and get mad at sinners and then tell *us* to live differently than he did.

He gave us his own life as an example of empathy.

**Philippians 2** gives us this advice in light of the way Jesus lived:

**3 ...In humility consider others better than yourselves.**

**4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.**

**5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:**

**6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,**

**7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.**

**8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!**

Jesus took empathy to extremes.

He looked at us and said to himself, These people really need to be understood, and loved, and I'm going to go all the way.

But it was in his going to extremes that he experienced the glory, the transformation, the victory.

The very next line says: "**Therefore [in other words, That's why] God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.**"

It wasn't because he won arguments.

It wasn't because he beat people into submission.

It was through his empathy — his understanding of people's needs — his willingness to lower himself to the level of common people — that he achieved genuine success.

The goal isn't just to stop thinking of others as beneath me.

The goal also isn't to stop thinking of others as better than me.

The goal is to trust God so completely that I don't have to think about myself at all.

Don't have to think about meeting my own needs, because I so completely believe God when he tells me he will do it for me.

The goal is to become so immersed in meeting the needs of others that my own needs never even cross my mind.

When I really get the concept of Christlike empathy — when I'm living it — I'll experience the glory too.

I'll be transformed too.

My life won't feel like one battle after another, one defeat after another.

When I finally escape the forest fire of anger, I'm free.

I feel like a winner.

I can finally really *live*.