

# THE ANGER PROJECT

TRUTH IN LOVE MINISTRIES  
VANCOUVER, WA

# THE ANGER PROJECT

Unseen beneath the surface in the lives of many of us is a powerful force called anger.

Anger is often referred to as a “secondary emotion”. What that means is that anger is the expression of a deeper root emotion that we are either not able to express or not willing to express.

Contrary to what most believe, anger is not always demonstrated by rage. Quite the opposite, in fact: most often, this underlying anger is expressed quietly and subtly. Instead of being like an inferno whose light and heat causes others to pull away, it is more like a morning-after coal in the fire pit of a camp ground. Only under the right conditions and with the right fuel will it flare up. The rest of the time, it just lies there in wait.

The following pages contain information and mini-projects to help you sort through and process the kind and cause of your underlying anger. You will find out as you go through this project what the truth is about many things, including your own emotions.

The greatest tools you have in doing this are the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. Prayerfully work through each portion of each of the three parts to this. When you are given a Scripture to read, read it over several times and let the words soak in before you press on and answer the relevant questions.

When you are given a mini-project to work through, ask the Holy Spirit to show you the truth before you even start. If you run into something that is difficult or unnerving, let it set for a while and pray over it. You will be amazed at what the Lord will do.

You will be given each of the three parts to The Anger Project separately. When you have completed one part, let me know and I will issue the next part to you. Do this at a steady pace, but do not feel that you have to rush through this. There is no deadline for completing this. What is most important is that you stay at it and trust the Lord’s leading and help through this process.

“May the Lord keep His gentle hand on you as you bring into the light things long buried in the dark. For we know that the power of the enemy is made nothing when God’s light shines brightly and the truth is revealed. And may His grace be always evident no matter where this project leads. In Christ’s name and for His sake we pray. Amen.”

**Week 1—Biblical Connections** -For each verse(s) answer the following: What does this passage mean? What is the relevance or significance of this passage to me? Memorize at least one of the verses this week.

**Day One: Anger is not in itself sinful.**

Psalm 7:11

**Day Two**

1 Kings 11:9

**Day Three**

2 Kings 17:18

**Day Four**

Mark 3:5

**Day Five: Be slow to become angry.**

Proverbs 14:17

**Day Six**

Proverbs 14:29

**Day Seven**

James 1:19-20

**Highlights:** Answer the following in your own words from your reading of Anger Part 1: Understanding Anger-- by David Powlison.

1 God expresses His love for His people by each of the three ways He expresses His anger at wrong. What three things does He promise to free believers from?

2 What is the close cousin of anger and respond from your own life with clarification (how is the "cousin" manifesting in your own life)?

3 What are the five sub-points the author makes about anger and if one of them is true of your life, explain here:

4 What are the seven tests and where do you see yourself dropping the ball and at which test?

**Application:** Do the following exercises.

1 It might be beneficial to see a physician to eliminate the possibility of physiological causes. Ask your discipler/counselor/counselor for a doctor referral if you do not already have one. When was your last check up? Make sure to disclose this to your discipler/counselor/counselor. If it has been longer than 3 years, then you will be expected to schedule an appointment with a doctor by your by your next session.

2 It is one thing to decide quietly that you will handle your anger more appropriately, but you will be more powerfully motivated to maintain your adjustments when you openly confess to others what will be different. Share with one person besides your discipler/counselor/counselor what you have learned

between your prayer time, Bible study, and reading. Write a journal entry regarding their response.

3 Now that you know from your scripture study that anger is not sinful in itself, and in biblical study, it is an emotion designed to mobilize force to tear something apart (Psalm 7:11; Mark 3:5). Ephesians 4:26 indicates that this expression may be sinful; respond to this in your own life in a paragraph if possible.

**Week 2 – Biblical Connections** -For each verse(s) answer the following: What does this passage mean? What is the relevance or significance of this passage to me? Memorize at least one of the verses this week.

**Day One: Love covers a multitude of sins and overlooks many offenses.**

Proverbs 10:12

**Day Two**

Proverbs 12:16

**Day Three**

Proverbs 17:9

**Day Four**

Proverbs 19:11

**Day Five**

1 Peter 4:8

**Day Six: Seek the way of love.**

1 Corinthians 13:4-5

**Day Seven: Cain's anger turned into hate and murder.**

Genesis 4:3-8

**Highlights:** Answer the following in your own words from your reading of Anger Part 2: Three Lies About Anger and the Transforming Truth -- by David Powlison

1. What does the author suggest is solution to sinful anger?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What are the three misconceptions of anger and which have you subscribed to up till now and why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. The author states that biblical counseling must approach people from three points, what are they and what is significant about these observations in relation to your situation(s)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What are the four questions that assist you to assess anger, which one is convicting for you, respond?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What are the four questions that lead to resolution of your anger, and which one impacted you the most?

**Application:** Do the following exercises.

1. In application question #2 from last week you shared what you were learning from your prayer, bible study and reading. Meet with that person again, and ask them if they would be willing to ask you the "hard questions" about your anger. Those questions might be; "Do you see me sinning with my anger?" "Are you willing to pray for me for the next 4 weeks while I am in discipleship?" Maybe take them out for coffee. Share the insights you gained this week and what God is doing in your life regarding these truths.
  
2. Create an index card one side write (and bring to next session), "Put off" and on the other write, "Put on"
  - a. On the "put off" side, write out Proverbs 14:17 and underneath it write the following two questions; 1) What am I wanting so badly? 2) What am I thinking that is wrong?
  
  - b. On the "put on" side, write out Proverbs 16:32; James 1:19 and underneath write out the following six questions; 1) What should I be thinking? 2) What is the right goal? 3) How can I be patient and think of others? 4) What does God and other's want? 5) How can I serve them? 6) Is there something right I should do?

**Week 3— Biblical Connections** -For each verse(s) answer the following: What does this passage mean? What is the relevance or significance of this passage to me? Memorize at least one of the verses this week.

**Day One: Hot words stir up strife.**

Proverbs 15:1

**Day Two: A hot-tempered man creates dissension.**

Proverbs 15:18

**Day Three: Do not associate with a hot-tempered man.**

Proverbs 22:24-25

**Day Four: Control yourself.**

Proverbs 25:28

**Day Five**

Proverbs 29:22

**Day Six**

Proverbs 30:33

**Day Seven: Fits of rage belong to your sinful nature, the way of sin.**

Galatians 5:19-22

**Highlights:** Answer the following from your reading of Anger Part 3: Getting to the Heart of Conflict – by David Powlison.

1 According to the author when does real change happen?

2 “The great eighteenth-century preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards had a daughter with an uncontrollable temper. When a young man asked Dr. Edwards for his daughter’s hand in marriage, he said no. The young man was crushed. “But I love her, and she loves me,” he pleaded. “That makes no difference,” Edwards replied; “she isn’t worthy of you.” “But she is a Christian, isn’t she?” the young man argued. “Yes,” said Edwards, “but the grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live.” How does this relate to your reading and what truths can you draw from it?

3 When we understand anger through God’s eyes and the cure of anger by Christ’s gospel, what understanding will we have?

4 The author gives some thorough comments on the role of faith in “getting to the heart of the conflict”, what are your thoughts on your faith regarding your anger?

**Application:** Do the following exercises.

1 Seek out a person (non-Christian or Christian), of whom you know you have been sinfully angry with, in the presence of while angry, or sinned against in your anger and ask them for forgiveness if you are apt to get angry for the wrong reasons. Commit yourself and to them that you will attempt being gentle when you ordinarily would flare up in anger. If you don’t get angry when you see evil, ask God to make you

sensitive to what He hates. Ask them for help if they are willing and have responded positively to your petition for forgiveness. Write a paragraph journal entry on this experience.

2 Write out a prayer and share with your counselor that includes the following elements regarding your anger: Praise, Confession, Thankfulness, Request, and Faith.

**Week 4--Biblical Connections** -For each verse(s) answer the following: What does this passage mean? What is the relevance or significance of this passage to me? Memorize at least one of the verses this week.

**Day One: Good news! Through the Spirit you can overcome the sin of a hot temper.**

Galatians 5:22-25

**Day Two: Handle anger in a godly way. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.**

Ephesians 4:26

**Day Three**

Leviticus 19:17

**Day Four**

Matthew 18:12-20

**Day Five**

Ephesians 4:26-32

**Day Six**

Romans 12:19-21

**Day Seven**

1 Corinthians 10:13

**Highlights:** Answer the following in your own words from your reading of Anger and God's Grace: A Case Study by Anonymous.

1 The author gives many examples of "Tests." What kind of test have you had recently?

2 After each "Test" the author has a "Turning Point," please describe what you think this is and how it relates to your issue in question #1?

3 Under the heading, "Fruits of Obedience," the author suggests that something has happened due to his work with his anger. What kinds of "fruits of obedience" are happening in your life? How is this confirmed for you (friends, spouse, family, co-workers, etc)?

4 What has made the difference and how does this affect your "Present Struggles"?

**Application:** Do the following exercises.

1 With the support person you have been sharing with the last couple of weeks (they should still be praying for you!) Confess to them how God may be using your present irritations and annoyances to reveal your lack of trust and to develop more trust in Him. Discuss and journal what some of the benefits that your problems and irritations may bring to you acknowledging that God has a good purpose for everything that comes in the Christian life. Share with your discipler/counselor in the next session what God is doing.

2 Habit patterns and responses that have been a part of us for years are not always easy to change. In fact, the reverse is usually true. But, by the power of God, we can change. We can control our anger. We do not need to continue to explode or become bitter. Thus far we have seen that to change we must plan ahead, we must think Biblically, and exercise self-control when stressful situations arise. In addition to those things, the person who wants to change should review what he is doing on a daily basis (your assignments have been preparing you for this). Create a journal entry per circumstance which reveals your progress in changing sinful patterns. The chart may contain titles like; "Problem or Circumstance," "Sounded off," "Put off/Put On (Ephesians 4:20-24)," "Resolved to..." and share with your discipler/counselor at the next session. Essentially, you are keeping a log of each circumstance that comes up that could cause you to be angry. Be specific and explain how you approached it and overcame the anger, or what you did to fail the trial and what you should have done. Please be specific.

3 Focus on several ways in which you need to change to become a nicer person. Make these items a constant matter in prayer, refuse to excuse yourself when you fail, confess your sins daily (1 John 1:9) and discipline yourself to work daily on becoming a more forbearing person. If you are a Christian and do this consistently, you will become a nicer person and become a better testimony for Christ. Draft an Action Plan on how you're going to do this and share with your discipler/counselor.

**Week 5--**

**Biblical Connections** -For each verse(s) answer the following: What does this passage mean? What is the relevance or significance of this passage to me? Memorize at least one of the verses this week.

**Day One: Overcoming anger, irritability, bitterness and wrath**

John 17:17

**Day Two**

2 Timothy 3:14-17

**Day Three**

Colossians 1:9-12

**Day Four**

Colossians 3:9-15

**Day Five**

Ephesians 4:20-24

**Day Six**

2 Timothy 2:24-26

**Day Seven**

2 Peter 1 (entire chapter)

**Highlights:** Answer the following in your own words from your reading of How to Deal with Anger by Henry Brandt.<sup>7</sup>

1. The author states, “This sentence sums up what almost everyone declares who comes to the consulting room with an anger problem: ‘My anger is a normal and justifiable response to the way I was treated.’ Seldom does one inquire about the possibility of anger being sin in their hearts.” Respond to the statement “anger being sin in their hearts.”
2. What are “The Steps to Change” and what do these steps look like in your life?
3. What about the “Important Message” struck you if anything?
4. What is your “Plan for Repentance?”

**Application:** Do the following exercises.

Congratulations: this is your last week and you have the truth and the tools to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling in the area of anger. In ensuring that these truths do not dissipate, you may choose one of the following as a final project:

- 1 Purchase a copy of “*Anger & Stress Management God’s Way*”, by Wayne Mack and write a reflective review and turn into your discipler/counselor within the next 2-3 months.
- 2 Create a small group or one-on-one study on Anger that is a minimum of 5-weeks long and turn into your discipler/counselor/counselor (you may use any of the resources or references you used in your 5-week study if it assists you). Please check with your discipler/counselor/counselor regarding any materials outside the spectrum of what you used in your transformation plan.
- 3 Purchase and read a copy of “*Respectable Sins*”, by Jerry Bridges and write a reflective review and turn into your discipler/counselor within the next 2-3 months.

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# Anger Part 1: Understanding Anger

by David Powlison

Every human being deals with anger. In a world of disappointments, imperfections, miseries, and sins (our own and others'), anger is a given. You get angry. I get angry. Those you counsel get angry. No doubt that's why the Bible comes packed with stories, teachings, and comments about anger: God intends us to understand anger and to know how anger problems can be resolved.

This article has three parts. "Understanding Anger" will focus on how we think about anger. The second and third parts, which will appear in future issues, will look at implications and how we counsel angry people.

What is anger? How do we make sense of it? Let's begin with five general statements about something we often experience but seldom stop to understand.

## 1. The Bible is About Anger

The Bible is about anger. Who is the angriest person in the Bible? *God*. When God looks at evil, "His anger does not turn away," as Isaiah repeated over and over. In Romans, Paul mentions God's anger and its effects more than fifty times, beginning with, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Romans 1:18). John says that the wrath of God "abides" on whoever will not believe in the Son of God for mercy: anger was, is, and will remain on their heads.<sup>1</sup>

That God is angry tells us something very important. Anger can be utterly right, good, appropriate, beautiful, the only fair response to something evil, and the loving response on behalf of evil's victims. In fact, "it would be impossible for a moral being to stand in the presence of perceived wrong indifferent and unmoved."<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise that Jesus Christ was filled with anger when He encountered people who perverted the worship of God and contributed to or were calloused to the sufferings of others.<sup>3</sup>

God's anger is never capricious or ill-humored. He responds justly to what is wrong and offensive. But He "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, rather that he should turn from his ways and live" (Ezekiel 18:23). Human beings were intended to love the one who made and sustains them, whose "riches of kindness, forbearance, and patience" all have experienced (Romans 2:4). But "their adulterous hearts turned away...and their eyes played the harlot after their idols" (Ezekiel 6:9). Is God's anger unfair? When challenged, God's response is straightforward: "Are My ways not right? Is it not your ways that are not

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right?...I shall judge you according to your ways and according to your deeds."<sup>4</sup>

The crimes that arouse God's wrath are capital crimes: betrayal, rebellion, deceit, blasphemous beliefs. The human heart is treacherous; we desire to believe *anything* but what is really true about God. The feelings aroused in us when we hear someone described by the word "traitor" give a hint of the reasoning within God's wrath. Human beings were intended to listen to God's life-giving voice and to treat one another with love. But we have hearts of stone. We are headstrong: "You are each one walking according to the stubbornness of his own evil heart, without listening to Me"; "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."<sup>5</sup> God would be less than good if He did not hate such evils.

God, of course, is also the most loving person in the Bible, and the Son of God expresses the fullness of His love. We often fail to see that God's anger and love are entirely consistent with each other as different expressions of His goodness and glory. The two work together: "Jesus burned with anger against the wrongs He met with in His journey through human life, as truly as He melted with pity at the sight of the

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<sup>1</sup>John 3:36; cf. 3:14-21.

<sup>2</sup>B. B. Warfield, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950, pp. 93-145), p. 107.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Mark 3:5 and 10:14; Matthew 18:6f and 23:2-36; John 2:14-17.

<sup>4</sup>Ezekiel 18:29 and 24:14.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremiah 16:12; Judges 21:25.

world's misery: and it was out of these two emotions that His actual mercy proceeded."<sup>6</sup> You can't understand God's love if you don't understand His anger. *Because He loves, He's angry at what harms.*

But notice the way God's children experience His anger: His anger is expressed *on their behalf* as supremely tender love! As we will see, the Bible is consistent about this truth. Yet anger is by definition *against* things, with an intent to destroy, so how can God's wrath become something God's children love and trust rather than something they fear or dislike? In what way is God's anger an expression of how He is for us, rather than the expression of how He is against us? The Good News is always presented in terms of how love and anger come to be resolved. *God expresses His love for His people by each of the three ways He expresses His anger at wrong.* He promises to free believers from three things.

*First, in love, the anger your sin deserves fell on Jesus.* God's anger at sin was expressed—but for your well-being. Once and for all in the past, God set you free from ever experiencing His wrath against your sins. In steadfast love, He freely offered His innocent Son to bear the wrath deserved by the guilty. God's anger punishes and destroys, giving our sin its due—but it was taken by Jesus, the Beloved Lamb, the Savior of sinners. Because He loves us, He offers Himself to bear the fire of anger; the way of our deliverance is His glory and our joy. God's loving anger, expressed in a way that brings us blessing, is the basis of life from the dead: it assures us of true forgiveness. Justification by faith and adoption as the children of God rest upon that form of love called substitutionary atonement. What we deserve, another bore because He chose to love us. In this supreme act of self-giving love, we experience God's anger acting FOR us. In response, we confidently repent and believe.

*Second, in love, God's anger works to disarm the power of your sin.* His anger at sin is again expressed *for your well-being*. In the present, He deals continually with indwelling sinfulness itself.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Spirit, who pours out God's love within you, is a burning fire of anger against evil, not to destroy you but to make you new. In steadfast love, He remakes us, not by tolerating our sin, but by hating our sin in a way that we learn to love! The process is not always pleasant because suffering, reproof, guilt, and owning up don't feel good. But deliverance, mercy, encouragement,

and a clearing conscience *do* feel good. God remakes us progressively into love, joy, peace, and wisdom—His own image. God's anger remedies and destroys ongoing sin. Because He loves us, He's angry at our self-destructive sinfulness; our growing faith and obedience is His glory and our joy. God's loving anger on our behalf nourishes and encourages faith: it assures us that He will keep working both inside us and around us to set us free of indwelling evil.<sup>8</sup> In the new birth and sanctification, God's destructive power works within us against what is wrong with us. He is for us, making us new, teaching us to listen, remaking us like Jesus. In the daily outworking of love, we experience God's anger working FOR us. In response, we energetically cooperate and obey.

*Third, in love, God's anger will deliver you from the pain of others' sins.* His anger at sin will be expressed again for your well-being. In the future He promises to end all suffering from others' sinfulness.<sup>9</sup> God hates the way people hurt other people. In steadfast love, He will deliver us from our enemies; on the last day all causes of pain will be destroyed forever. At the same time, the Bible is clear that those who oppose God and hurt His people exist for a purpose: they are God's unwitting agents in the sanctification task. They act for their own sinful reasons, but also accomplish God's purposes for good as He tests and transforms us through suffering. They are agents of God's loving discipline towards His people that we might learn patience, faith, love for enemies, courage, and every good fruit that can only be learned in tough times. Yet they are under wrath for the malice with which they do what they do.<sup>10</sup> God's anger

<sup>8</sup>Hebrews 12:5-11.

<sup>9</sup>Revelation 21:4 culminates a theme that runs throughout this entire book of comfort for God's afflicted people: the wrath of the Lamb (6:16f) brings about mercy and life for the people of the Lamb (7:16f). And now in part we experience temporal deliverances (e.g., the promises of Psalms 31 and 121, and many Bible stories). In fact, on the whole God rarely allows human sin to play out its intrinsic violent logic. When it does (genocide, torture, abortion, rape, child abuse) both victims and those who love them either learn to long for the day when such evils will be destroyed or they become like their tormenters.

<sup>10</sup>This theme is rich. The devil plays this role throughout his career. So do the Babylonians, Judas, and every other historical oppressor who has a moment in the sun. For example, Babylon was a "golden cup [of wrath]" and a "shatterer" in the hand of the Lord, an agent enacting just anger on the stage of history (Jeremiah 46:10; 51:7; 51:20-23). Five themes crisscross through the discussions of Babylon by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk. (1) Because God's people sinned, Babylon brought disciplinary anger—always leaving the remnant whose faith was pure and purified through trouble. (2) Because of godless human pride—"all mankind is stupid, devoid of knowledge" (Jeremiah 51:17)—Babylon

<sup>6</sup>Warfield, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup>A work that will be completed when we see Jesus return on the day of wrath. See, for example, Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 John 3:2.

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will punish and destroy His enemies—because He loves His children and is glorified in our deliverance from suffering. So we groan in pain, because the painful is still painful; but we groan in hope, too, because we know what will come.<sup>11</sup> Because He loves us, He's angry at people who seek to hurt us: our blessedness is His glory and our joy. God's loving anger on our behalf nourishes and encourages our

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faith. God's beloved children hope and trust that at the return of Christ, His anger will make things right.<sup>12</sup> In anticipation, we groan and eagerly wait.

God expresses His love for His people by each of the three ways He expresses His anger at wrong. God's loving anger resolves the entire problem of evil in a way that brings Him inexpressible glory and brings us inexpressible blessing: justly condemning evil, severing the power of remnant evil, and bringing relief from suffering. Numerous psalms connect the steadfast love and mercies of the Lord to this loving wrath by which He delivers His children both from their own sins and from those who harm them.<sup>13</sup> "If God is for

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brought punitive anger on the nations in darkness. (3) Because Babylon sinned in arrogance, she too would drink the cup of wrath. (4) Because God loves His people, though they now agonize amid sufferings, they will experience merciful deliverance into a place of peace. (5) Because God had plans of blessing for all mankind, He would "in the latter days" choose other believers out of the nations now sunk in darkness.

<sup>11</sup>This theme of hope in affliction runs throughout the Bible. One need only wave in the direction of Psalms, Lamentations, Romans 8, 2 Corinthians, Hebrews, Revelation....

<sup>12</sup>Romans 12:19.

<sup>13</sup>We might fairly speak of the "steadfast love/anger of the Lord," of His "lovingangerkindness." The "unfortunate, needy and afflicted" who face the angry malice of others hope in the anger of God's love to make things right (Psalms 9-10). God's anger at others' sins is an object of faith in numerous psalms. For example, in Psalm 37, I needn't be angry and fretful when evil comes at me if I take refuge in the Lord and trust that His anger will deal with evildoers. But those who are honest never become either stoic or self-righteous. Suffering prompts hurt and angry outcry; suffering prompts self-reflection that uncovers my own evil. Many psalms (cf. Habbakkuk) show that odd yet honest

us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

It's important to make proper distinctions. God's wrath has become the hope of His children though it is the despair of His enemies. But those enemies who are willing to believe the staggering message of how wrath is converted into grace through Jesus Christ will be changed into friends. The truth is that you can't understand God's love if you don't understand His anger. This is simply the message of the book of Psalms, that royal road into the heart of redeemed humankind, with its otherwise inexplicable interweaving of joy and sorrow, hope and anguish, confidence and fear, contentment and anger. You can't understand God's love if you don't understand His anger. This is simply the message of the book of Romans, that royal road into the mind of God: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways.... To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:33, 36).

Come at the opening question from a different angle. Who is the angriest person in the Bible? *Satan*. His anger, also, does not turn away. He has "great wrath," being a "murderer from the beginning" even until now.<sup>14</sup> Satan's anger springs from malice and the desire to hurt people. His anger, the paradigm of all sinful anger, is the antithesis of God's. Satan's hostility aims to make things wrong, in service to his own cravings. This also tells us something very important. Anger can be utterly wrong, bad, inappropriate, ugly, a completely destructive response. Such anger summarizes the very essence of evil: "I want my way and not God's, and because I can't have my way, I rage."

It is a curious and often confusing thing that the same word, "anger," speaks of both the finest and the foulest feelings and acts. Maintain proper distinctions, because those you counsel will usually be as confused about anger as they are about love.<sup>15</sup> Sinful anger

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combination of (1) knowing that I *deserve* the wrath of God while uncovering my need for mercy and change, and yet (2) knowing I *do not deserve* the unfair hostility of men who happen to be God's instruments. In Psalm 38, God's anger at my sins, painfully felt, eventually produces repentance, hope, and faith—and outcry against those who brought the pain. In Psalm 39 wrestling with my anger at the evil around me eventually leads to hope for deliverance from my own evil—and the evil around me. In Psalm 40, God's steadfast love/anger again delivers me both from my own sins and from those who hurt me.

<sup>14</sup>Revelation 12:12; John 8:44.

<sup>15</sup>Like "anger," the word "love," as used both in the Bible and in everyday speech, does duty for absolutely contradictory things. We must press behind a word to get to the freight of meanings it bears. When definitions of terms get

usurps God and does harm; godly anger loves, enthroning God and doing good to people.

The Bible is about anger. In the very first exchange after the fall into sin, Adam blamed both Eve and God for what he had done. Blameshifting can feel nearly emotionless, but the themes of sinful anger readily appear: accusation of others, the stance of presumed superiority and innocence. And it's only a chapter later that anger first breaks out into emotion and violence. "Cain became very angry"; his countenance became grim and unhappy; he killed his brother (Genesis 4:5). The logical result of sinful anger is recorded thereafter in the story of Noah: "The earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11).

Scripture portrays many things about anger. For example, anger can be falsely aroused. In Genesis 39, Potiphar's anger burned at the thought that Joseph had been dallying with his wife. And anger can mask itself in innocence. Potiphar's wife was angry, too: cool, sneaky, manipulative, vengeful. She played the victim in order to destroy an innocent man who had rebuffed her cravings. The same person can express both righteous and sinful anger. When Moses' anger burned at those worshipping the golden calf, he burned in the image of God.<sup>16</sup> Anger energized him to redress the problem. But when Moses cursed the people and struck the rock, he burned in the image of sin. Anger energized him to dishonor the God of grace.<sup>17</sup>

God often speaks His thoughts on anger in propositional form. He devotes the sixth commandment, "You shall not commit murder," to the family of judgmental reactions that includes sinful anger. Jesus's commentary on this commandment (Matthew 5:21f) expanded the scope of its implications to include attitudes and words. The Lord first spoke the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" in a context (Leviticus 19:14-18) that contrasts love with matters pertinent to sinful anger: intentionally hurting helpless people, unjust judgment, character defamation, physical harm, inner hatred, vengeance, holding a grudge. Interestingly, that same passage positively defines love in terms that relate to righteous anger: clear, loving reproof arises from caring about the welfare of others. Wisdom, the patiently acquired gift

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jumbled, mischief results. Both "anger" and "love" have been much abused by failing to consistently discern the line between good and evil that runs through their middle. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes once commented astutely, "Words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon with them, but they are the money of fools" (*Leviathan*, Part 1, Chapter 4).

<sup>16</sup>Compare Exodus 32:19 with 32:11.

<sup>17</sup>Numbers 20:7-13.

from God, frequently comments on anger: the wise and foolish are distinguishable by how they get angry.<sup>18</sup> And Jesus' messengers frequently carried words about anger. Variations on the theme constitute half of Paul's list of representative deeds of the sinful flesh: "enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions." Every aspect of the Spirit's fruit is the explicit opposite of sinful anger.<sup>19</sup>

Both by precept and example, the Bible continually enlightens us about anger, intending to change us.

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*Every aspect of the Spirit's fruit is the explicit opposite of sinful anger.*

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The motivations for sinful anger are exposed within Scripture: specific longings and unbelief. Why did the Israelites grumble repeatedly in the wilderness? The Bible doesn't leave us in doubt. They didn't get what they wanted and they didn't believe that God was good, powerful, and wise. Those grumbling passages in Exodus and Numbers also register how specific anger's motives are, and how motives of the heart attach to details of the situation. When the food was boring, the people craved cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. When Moses acted as God's spokesman, Miriam and Aaron craved to share the microphone. When enemies threatened, the people feared death, not believing God would help them. When water was not forthcoming, the people craved irrigated grain, figs, grapes, pomegranates, and water.<sup>20</sup> Anger can be grim and murderous like Cain; anger can burn with emotion like Potiphar; anger can plan with cool malice like his wife; anger can rumble and grumble, running on in complaints, unhappiness, and bickering, like the wilderness wanderers. But in all cases the cause of sinful anger boils down to specific lies and lusts that rule the human heart. You and those you counsel are no different.

Anger also brings devastating consequences. God is justly angry at our sinful anger. For example, Moses' tantrum against the people (another typical pattern, getting angry at angry people, grumbling

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<sup>15</sup>Like "anger," the word "love," as used both in the Bible and in everyday speech, does duty for absolutely contradictory things. We must press behind a word to get to the freight of meanings it bears. When definitions of terms get jumbled, mischief results. Both "anger" and "love" have been much abused by failing to consistently discern the line between good and evil that runs through their middle. The

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about grumblers) cost him the promised land. Of course other people tend to react in kind to an angry person which multiplies the general unpleasantness: "An angry man stirs up strife" (Proverbs 29:22). Angry people are divisive; divisive people are angry. You will often witness immediate consequences in the lives of those you counsel: frightened children, an embittered spouse, spoiled friendships, health problems, difficulties in the workplace, estrangements at church. Troubles dog the steps of an angry person: "A man of great anger shall bear the penalty, for if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again" (Proverbs 19:19).

Anger feeds on itself and grows. Saul was a habitually self-willed man. His brooding temper seethed just below the surface. David's sweet harp and amazing acts of merciful restraint soothed Saul temporarily, but then he would explode again. Scripture is full of examples of anger, with its many forms, causes, and varied effects. Jonah, Jezebel, Nabal, and the Pharisees are only a few of the lives gripped by this powerful and most typical evil. In every list of typical sins—and there is no temptation that is not common to all—anger is prominent.

Thanks be to God, the Bible is also about the gospel that forgives and changes angry people. Proverbs, Ephesians, and James are only a few of the books that dissect anger in order to redeem and transform it. God never holds up a mirror without holding out a lamp. He speaks fully and frequently about His mercy to angry people. He speaks fully and frequently about the alternatives to sinful anger: trust, forgiveness, patience, contentment, the pursuit of justice, godly confrontation, all the varied strategies and attitudes of peacemaking, self-control, self-knowledge. Righteous anger is an excellent and constructive thing. Moses, Samson, David, and Paul, like Jesus, on occasion burned with this most rare righteousness.

God in His grace pours out kindness on people who were "enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another" (Titus 3:3). What does grace intend to accomplish? Grace creates wise, self-controlled, loving people who are able to stand up and do some good in this world of hostility (Titus 2:11-3:8). Every element in the definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is the explicit opposite of sinful anger. To understand your anger is to understand something that lies at the heart of darkness. To change, learning both mercy and righteous anger, is to enter the heart of light. We are by nature all warmakers; blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Anger provides a tremendous counseling opportu-

nity. The issues are so clear. When angry, the human heart is laid out on the table with nowhere to hide. Often counselees' lives are confusing; issue complicates issue; problem piles on problem. Where do you begin? Many times anger is a good place to start. The behaviors are often plain to all: the tone of voice, the cutting edge in the words, the glitter in the eyes, the mask of disgust. Its presence is easy to see: grumbling, whining, hostility, judgmentalism, bitterness, rancor, negativism, hatred, bickering, disgruntlement, manip-

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*Righteous anger is an excellent  
and constructive thing.*

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ulation, coercion. The motives are usually not difficult to uncover: a mosaic of very specific desires, fears, false beliefs, demands. The effects are patently bad: broken relationships, health problems, misery. The Word of God applies so immediately and in so many ways: bringing self-knowledge, conviction, mercy, hope, constructive alternatives, tangible help. No wonder the Bible spends so much time talking about anger and the alternatives!

And no wonder it's so important that we understand the Bible's messages about anger. Big things are at stake. On the one hand, the discontent-anger-hate-violence family features some of the most characteristic human sins. We all experience sinful anger, and we all need help. On the other hand, God expresses His glory and mercy through righteous anger. What we need, He gives freely in revealing Himself for our well-being.

## **2. Anger is Something You Do**

Anger is something that you DO with ALL that you are as a person. Getting this straight will help you see through the half-truths by which our culture lies to us about anger.<sup>21</sup> Every part of human nature is involved. Anger involves your body. It has a marked physiological component: the flushed face, the adrenaline surge, the clenched muscles, the churning stom-

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<sup>21</sup>C. S. Lewis once made the telling comment, "The worst lie is the half-truth." J. I. Packer commented similarly, "A half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth" (from the Introductory Essay to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, reprinted as *Life by His Death!*, London: Grace Publications Trust, 1992). Anger, hostility, and slander, by the way, are masters of such half-truthful lies.

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ach, the nervous tension. Interestingly, most of the words Scripture uses for anger communicate through vivid, bodily metaphors. The two chief Old Testament words for anger describe “nostrils” and “burning.” If you’ve ever seen a really angry person you’ve probably noticed how nostrils flare, breathing becomes loud and irregular, blood floods the capillaries and heats the skin. Similarly, the main Greek words for anger communicate the sense of “steaming or smoking” and “swollen,” reflecting the sensation of heat and the evident swelling of face and eyes. It is no accident that many of our idioms for anger work off the physiological effects: “hot under the collar,” “steamed,” “breathing fire,” “volcanic,” “seeing red,” “hot-blooded,” “slow burn.” That anger is unmistakably physiological lends plausibility to those medicalistic theories that view it as basically physiological, hence something to be soothed through medications. Of course our hormones, blood flow, muscles, and grimaces register anger. But that’s not all there is to it. Biblically, the *whole* person does anger.

When someone says, “I’m angry,” we usually think of emotions first. And anger is a “passion.” People *feel* angry. Their emotional equilibrium is “upset.” Intensity levels vary tremendously, of course. The emotional Richter scale can range from mild irritability to blind rage. You don’t need to rant and rave to have a problem with sinful anger. Grumpiness, the cutting remark, sulky self-pity, and the critical attitude all qualify. Curiously, some of the most frightening forms of anger seem almost beyond emotion. They are icy rather than hot. I will never forget a conversation I had many years ago with a sixteen-year-old girl. She seemed angry at her parents. When I asked her about it she looked at me with the cold eyes that you see in mug shots of professional killers. She responded in a flat voice, “I don’t get angry, I get even.” A wide range of emotional colors expresses discontent and hostility, and you’ll encounter them all in counseling. But many people want to think of anger only as an emotion, and perhaps as a neutral, God-given emotion at that. Yet why limit anger to physiology or feeling when it is clearly more?

Anger also consists in thoughts, mental words and pictures, attitudes, judgments. It involves reason, imagination, memory, conscience, every inner faculty. Even if no words or actions come forth, the angry person thinks intensely. “You are stupid. This is not fair. I can’t believe she did that to me.” The internal video camera replays clips from what happened, or may script and rehearse imaginary scenarios of violent retribution. The entire criminal justice system—except a defense attorney for the accused!—plays out in the

courtroom of the mind: investigator, prosecuting attorney, witnesses, judge, jury, jailer, and hangman. This judicial attitude is written into the nature of anger. It is an attitude of judgment, condemnation, and displeasure at persons or things. Words and actions get thought and planned, whether or not they ever get said or done.

Anger occurs not only in the mind, it breaks out into behavior. I knew a couple who culminated one particularly violent argument with a gunfight, him upstairs and her downstairs. I’ve never done that. But I coolly communicated my irritation with my wife

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### *Anger rarely stands alone.*

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when I buried my nose one inch further into a magazine after she made a comment that I didn’t like. Anger does things. It shows up in accusatory or sarcastic words, curses, exaggerations, gestures, hitting, disgusted sighs, walking out of the room, rising decibel level, threats, glowering. You do anger, with all that you are.

And the plot thickens. Anger, like other sins, rarely stands alone. It is often woven deeply into other personal problems. Often anger and fear are close cousins. I’ve witnessed a mother scream in rage at her young child who lay on the ground crying after a playground accident. She’s afraid; she yells instead of comforts. Some theories of anger try to make anger secondary to fear, but this is surely mistaken. When things don’t go right, all sinners feel like the raccoon cornered in the garage: fight or flight depending on the odds, anger and fear coexisting.

Anger complicates many other problems. Substance abuse can connect with anger in a variety of ways. A family friend once said of her husband, “He drinks to maintain control of himself against his rage.” When he didn’t drink, he’d get increasingly hostile towards her, his boss, and the world. Decades-old grudges would haunt him. When he drank he got mellow and felt better. Alcohol served as medication *against* rage. Here’s a different pattern. A woman drank to *express* her anger at straightlaced parents. Embarrassing everybody and ending up in the gutter served as a form of revenge.

Sexual immorality can connect to anger. A single man spoke of his use of pornography as a “temper tantrum at God for not giving me a wife.” Many adulteries occur as a way to get even. Suicide can express the same thing: “You’ve hurt me so badly, and I have

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no other way to get back, but you'll sure feel bad after I kill myself and you'll have to live with what you did to me." Anger at oneself is a common phenomenon: "I can't believe I did something so stupid. If only I was more beautiful, rich, intelligent, and scintillating in conversation, but I'm just an ugly, poor, stupid bore." Self-recrimination, self-accusations, even self-torture (cigarette burns, banging one's head against the wall, and so forth) can manifest hopeless, self-hating rage at a sense of failure.

So far, we've chiefly described sinful anger as a personal problem. But anger is usually an interpersonal event. Anger has an *object*, a target.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, anger is a central feature of interpersonal conflicts wherever they occur: marriages, families, churches, workplaces, neighborhoods, nations. It is an interper-

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*Anger is natural, by creation. But since the Fall, sinful anger is also a given.*

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sonal strategy, a social and political event. War has both its offensive and defensive strategies. Like petty barons squaring off, people shoot arrows of malicious accusation and build castle walls of aggrieved self-righteousness, fear, and hurt. Here, anger adopts the military role as well as the judicial role. It is an ideal weapon for getting what you want. Anger coerces, intimidates, and manipulates. You will counsel families that "walk on eggshells" or "duck into foxholes at incoming fire" in relation to one explosive member.

It is no surprise that anger also plays out in the most basic interpersonal relationship: with God. Many people are angry at God. People treat God the same way they treat others—that observation will carry you a long way in counseling. The Israelites grumbled indiscriminately, accusing both Moses and the Lord. People frequently target God with mockery, curses, bitterness, and willful misrepresentation. When the Son of God walked the earth, people were out to get Him. You will often counsel people who view God through the lens of accusatory anger: as if God were in fact the devil, a kill-joy whose nature is malicious, legalistic, cruel, remote, and uncaring. This is no surprise. If I believe that God exists to give me

what I want, I will burn when He doesn't deliver. In fact, when considered from the standpoint of what motivates the human heart, all sinful anger has immediate reference to God. If I curse the heat and humidity, I assail God in three ways. First, I forsake Him, the fountain of life, acting as if He did not exist. Second, I act as if I were God instead, elevating my will for comfort to supreme status in my universe. Third, I grumble against Him, implicitly criticizing the real Author of "bad" weather for displeasing me.

Anger is bodily, emotional, mental, behavioral. It weaves in among many other problems. It is decidedly interpersonal, both with respect to people and God. In short, you DO anger, with ALL that you are. But where does it come from?

### 3. Anger is Natural

Anger is a given; it is natural to human beings in two very different ways. It is natural because we were created in God's image; it is natural because we fell into sin. God *created* us, in His image no less, with the capacity for anger. He called it very good. In fact, Adam and Eve *should* have gotten lethally angry when the serpent lied to them about life and death, God, and wisdom. They should have reacted with strong emotions, clear arguments, and violent action. They should have challenged those lies, picked up stones, and killed the serpent. Anger is a good thing built into human nature.

As human beings made and remade in the image of a holy God, we are hardwired with the capacity for anger at wrong, as an expression of love both for God and for those harmed by wrong. And, as sinners who have ourselves received mercy instead of wrath, we have the otherwise inexplicable capability simultaneously to hate wrong and to give love to those who do wrong: "on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 23). When in counseling you encounter adultery, or violence towards the weak, or cruel words, you will feel pain and loathing at the deeds and their effect on others. And yet you will simultaneously have mercy to give generously to the perpetrators of such evils.

Other counseling implications abound. For example, we need to remember that God's creation is diverse; all people are not alike. We should not be surprised that some people are born more attuned to justice or more forceful emotionally than others. Among my three children differences in temperament showed up almost from the day of birth: different capacities for emotional reaction, for reacting to injustice, for reasoning about events. God's dealings with anger (and other issues) don't cancel human diversity; He works

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<sup>22</sup>Of course people can become angry at nonhuman objects, too. Balaam beat his donkey when it crossed him. Complaints about food and the weather seem endemic to human nature.

within it.

So anger is natural, by creation. But since the Fall, *sinful* anger is also a given. As human beings corrupted into the image of an unholy accuser, we are also hardwired for resentment and hatred. And in a fallen world, human anger is so disordered that James can make a sweeping indictment: "Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Only a fool would not think twice before getting angry, but we easily play the fool. Even righteously aroused anger easily degenerates

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*Anger evaluates and  
anger is itself evaluated.*

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into self-righteousness, gossip, self-pity, vengeance, cynicism, and merciless accusation.

Our capacity for sinful anger shows up early: nobody has to teach a child to throw a tantrum. The first time one of my daughters threw herself on the floor, kicked her feet, and screamed bloody murder, my wife and I looked at each other in amazement. Our daughter had never seen anyone act that way, at least not to our knowledge. She was young, and hadn't been exposed to many other children. In fact she'd never been out of our presence except for brief stints with babysitters, none of whom we thought likely to have demonstrated what we were now witnessing. But there she was, mad as a wet hen because her will had been crossed! It was an act of creative, unlearned iniquity. We need to remember that total depravity includes our anger no less and no more than anything else distinctively human.

#### 4. Anger is Learned

Anger is learned, also in two different ways. First, anger is taught and modeled to us. We pick it up from other people, for good or ill. We learn what to get upset about, and how to show our displeasure.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>When it comes to explaining anger, biblical Christians don't cast their vote with either "nature" or "nurture," or even with "nature and nurture." The divide between good and evil runs through *everything*, so we discern four factors. In sizing up the effects of "nature," you can't understand people without noting *both* creation-nature and sin-nature as we saw in the previous section. Similarly, in sizing up the effects of "nurture," we must pay attention *both* to sin-nurture and grace-nurture. Patterns of both sin and wisdom may be nurtured (Proverbs 13:20). Neither nature nor nurture are neutral.

Habits, styles, and tendencies to sinful anger are easily acquired from others. Many children who had never thought of letting fly an angry curse—they had never even heard all the bad words—are surprised when one slips out a week after first riding on the school bus. Parental shock perhaps quickly nips habit formation. But later, when they live in a college dorm or land their first job on a construction crew, in a factory, or in the military, the four letter words creep in as all-purpose modifiers: "Pass the %\$#@! butter" isn't usually learned at home.

By modeling, angry and hostile curses become routine ways to respond to the mildest frustration. With good reason the Bible says, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared" (Proverbs 22:24f). Counselors will look for companions from whom angry counselees have learned how to be angry and what to be angry at. A parent who routinely damns the weather, the traffic, or his spouse disciplines his children to do likewise.

Godly, constructive anger is also learned, though habits, styles, and tendencies to righteous anger are not *easily* acquired from others. Nonetheless, "he who walks with wise men will be wise" (Proverbs 13:20). And if we walk with the wisest man who ever lived, we will learn to "walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

Many of the details of a person's style of anger may be influenced by parents, peers, or ethnic group. Cultural differences in expressing both sinful and righteous emotions can be marked. Italian anger and Norwegian anger typically differ drastically in modes of expression.<sup>24</sup> Sinful anger always comes "out of the heart" (Mark 7:20-23), but the exact form anger takes often is nurtured. Counselors should expect that both righteous and sinful anger will look different, depending on individual and cultural differences, and should not impose their own personality style on those they counsel.

Anger is learned in a second way. It is practiced, and can become "second nature," a habitual manner of life. Our patterns of anger become characteristic. Some people hit the roof and then get over it; others go into their shell; others go on the rampage for days. Some people raise their voices, others get quiet; some

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<sup>24</sup>Woody Allen fans will remember the famous split-screen scene in the movie *Annie Hall*. The tight-lipped civility of upper class, Westchester Anglo-Saxons contrasted with the volatile emotional roller-coaster of working class, Brooklyn Jews. The habits of the former should not form our image of biblical self-control. The habits of the latter should not form our image of biblical emotional expression.

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people give plenty of signals that they are angry, others make guerrilla strikes out of nowhere; some use anger to intimidate and control people, others use anger to sulk and avoid people. Counselors must become familiar with the characteristic flesh of their sheep.<sup>25</sup>

### 5. Anger is a Moral Matter

Anger is an intrinsically moral matter. I mean this statement in two ways. Anger evaluates and anger is itself evaluated. This has been implicit in the previous discussion, but is worth holding up for inspection. First, anger evaluates; that is, it weighs something or someone, finds it lacking, wrong, or displeasing, and then moves into action. Anger arouses us to attack or discredit what we find displeasing. Anger has on occasion been well-described as the “moral emotion.” It is a self-contained judicial system, reacting to perceived wrong with energy. Throughout this article I have typically broadened our definition of “anger” to include judgmentalism, grouching, blameshifting, hatred, violence, and the like. All of these things are *judgments against perceived evil*. What we typically think of as “anger”—a raised voice, accusatory words, emotional heat, hostile attitude—is probably best defined as “the emotionally aroused form of judgment against perceived evil.”

In this article we are concerned with the essential nature of anger, not with discriminating degrees and nuances. And that essential nature is to pass a moral judgment against something that we think both wrong and important. I care enough about something to be *moved*: the “motion” in emotion, the “motive” in “motivation.” I am moved both to feel strongly and to do something. Anger by its very nature takes a moral position; it judges.

Second, anger is evaluated. God judges our judging; He morally evaluates every single instance of anger. Did I *perceive* good and evil accurately? Did I *react* to perceived evil in a godly way? If I become peevish when the phone rings and breaks my concentration, muttering a string of expletives, my anger proclaims, “This phone call is bad and deserves to be damned.” God evaluates both my criterion for judgment and my way of reacting, and finds both wrong. If I curse out an adulterer and gossip about him, my anger proclaims, “Adultery is wrong, and should be

met with cursing and gossip.” God evaluates my criterion for judgment and finds it right; He evaluates my way of reacting and finds it wrong. If I become angry when my child mocks his mother, and respond to him with vigorous, loving reproof, my anger proclaims, “Disrespect is wrong, and should be met energetically with respect, challenge, and mercy.” God evaluates my anger, both my criterion for judgment and my way of reacting, and finds them right. Such anger expresses love for both my wife and child. The emotional force of such loving anger does many good things. It motivates me to intervene; it protects my wife; it drives home to my child the significance of the wrong; it models the right way to respond to another’s sin.

Christianity is not about stoic apathy, being “above” emotional reaction.<sup>26</sup> Many people, in the name of “being self-controlled,” actually prove themselves to be uncaring or obtuse. They sin by omission; they are aloof, failing to help, where godliness would get upset and look for ways to make an impact. But neither is Christianity about unleashing emotions. “He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who is quick-tempered exalts folly” (Proverbs 14:29). Anger is not neutral. A line between wisdom and foolishness runs through the center of every instance of “anger”; it is either godly or devilish.

Here biblical thinking goes directly against our culture. Our culture typically says, “Anger is neither good nor bad, it just is.” The theory that emotions are neutral has become a refrain of the therapeutic culture. But it’s not true that anger “just is.” Many people, in the name of “just being honest” or “getting it off my chest,” prove themselves to be recklessly self-centered. They sin by commission; they are impulsive, causing harm, where godliness would consider the impact of words. Learning to discern the difference between righteous and sinful anger is extremely important, and not always easy.

We must fine-tune our moral judgment—“have

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<sup>25</sup>“Characteristic flesh” is Richard Lovelace’s provocative term for the relatively stable patterns of sin that characterize each of us and differ from person to person. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 110.

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<sup>26</sup>Many popular philosophies of life are essentially stoic. Cognitive-behavioral therapies, for example, view “negative” emotion (anger, discouragement) as a product of faulty beliefs about events. They seek to teach a set of “rational” beliefs that produce equilibrium no matter what occurs. While there is no doubt that false beliefs produce sinful anger, true beliefs ought to produce anger, dismay, and anguish on occasion. See the Psalms. Similarly, Hindu beliefs and practices—calling the sensory world illusion and teaching techniques of calming meditation—are essentially stoic. Of course faulty beliefs frequently create needless and sinful reactions to illusory provocations, but true faith does not produce bliss. Jesus did not live a calm life; He cared too much.

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our senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14)—to tell the difference between righteous and sinful anger. God and the devil are both angry all the time; on whose side is your anger? Scripture gives many criteria by which God trains us to discern. We will consider seven.

**Test #1: Do you get angry about the right things?**

Anger addresses *perceived* wrong. Did you perceive rightly? This is the first great divide. A person may become angry at things he has no business being angry about. People generate their own set of expectations, their own "laws," their own criteria of good and bad, and react angrily when these "laws" are broken. Jonah is the classic case; twice he burned with anger, and twice God challenged him, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" (Jonah 4). He had perceived God's compassion on people and the withering of a shade plant as serious wrongs. Much sinful anger arises from similar misperceptions. For example, I may expect to eat roast beef for dinner. When I sit down to dinner, macaroni and cheese is served. If I grouse irritably, is my anger neutral? No, it's sinful, because I have perceived as bad something that is good and meant to be received with thanks. Much anger arises from perceptions distorted by the beliefs, cravings, and expectations that substitute for God's rule in our hearts.

A friend once came up to me after church and said, "I want to ask your forgiveness for something. I've been angry at you for eight months, and have just held it in trying to forgive you. But God has convicted me, and I want to get things solved between us." I was grateful that she wanted to get things straight and that she'd had the courage and humility to raise a problem. But as she tried to describe an incident in the hallway at church where I had ignored and snubbed her, she lost me. What was she talking about? I couldn't remember ever doing anything against her. Finally we pieced it together. During the worship service one morning I had started to feel nauseous. While heading for the men's room I had passed her in the hall with the barest acknowledgment, no hello or conversation, and an unhappy look on my face. She had interpreted all this as directed at her. Eight months of anger resulted from perceiving evil where evil was not present. Her desire for acceptance had ruled. Or perhaps it would be better to say, her craving for acceptance had conflicted with the desires of the Spirit in her. To be seemingly ignored and frowned at by a presumed friend is no fun. Where God rules, hurt and anger will move us to resolve things in a godly way, checking out our perceptions. This in fact she finally did, to the praise of His grace, and we were heartily reconciled.

But where false beliefs and cravings rule, our perceptions stay twisted; we get stuck in hurt and anger. To a degree this had happened, delaying reconciliation by many months. Anger *always* reflect a person's moral standards, his definitions of good and bad, right and wrong. Check them out!<sup>27</sup>

You may very well be angry at something you *should* hate. You may accurately perceive a wrong. The wrong may be against you: harshness from your spouse or parent, disrespect from your child, lying by an employee, fraud by a salesman, rape by a relative. You may observe evil done publicly or to another individual: child molestation, verbal cruelty, homosexualist and abortionist propaganda, lies and manipulation by a televangelist, wartime atrocities. Anger is the appropriate Christian response. You would be a stone, a sentimentalist, or a stoic if you didn't feel some degree of anger. But at this point we face another divide.

**Test #2: Do you express anger in the right way?**

It's possible to see the wrong in another's life accurately, and yet to express anger in a sinful way. Jesus'

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<sup>27</sup>A similar dynamic frequently operates in the anger at self that our culture calls "low self-esteem." For example, a mother of preschoolers may be depressed, judging herself a failure for not having a house that looks like it dropped from the pages of *House Beautiful*. Christians often mishandle this in one of two ways. First, many call her self-directed anger and disappointment "false guilt," and say she hasn't done anything wrong. They then add a quasi-gospel, such as "Jesus accepts you just as you are, so relax and accept yourself." This often-repeated formula may sound plausible, but is untrue. Second, others take her guilt at face value, and give her the real gospel, "Jesus forgives the guilt of your sin and helps you change." But that misfires, too, because the problem has not been adequately defined. The mercy and aid Jesus gives is not intended to forgive normal clutter and enable supernormal tidiness.

It is more accurate to say that her self-punishing anger expresses "distorted guilt." Her guilty feelings are the product of a false law. She is truly guilty of serving that false standard and of standing (or, in this case, falling) by "works" under that false law. Her standards of judgment are distorted, and her *modus operandi* is Christless. The truth of God—both law and mercy—can renew her mind. Just as the notion of false guilt is inadequate, so it is inadequate simply to give her a quasi-gospel that says Jesus accepts her. Jesus doesn't just accept her as she is, because He stands against her real sins. But because her guilt is distorted by false criteria, it is also inadequate simply to say that Jesus forgives her without doing spade work that defines her real need accurately. Jesus doesn't forgive her for not having a picture-perfect house. That is not a sin. He will forgive her for worshiping her own (and her culture's) false standard, and He will help her live grateful for grace, rather than fruitlessly trying to prove herself. When she understands her real sin, then real grace makes wonderful sense.

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parable about “the log and the speck” turns on this issue.<sup>28</sup> Righteously aroused anger (passing Test #1) is often the hardest to get a grip on at this point. The thing that happened “out there” seems so wrong that I go blind to the wrong that is “in here.” The sins of self-righteousness are notably self-deceiving.

The clearest gauge of whether anger is right or wrong in its expression is whether it acts to condemn or to offer help. We are called to put our faith in the fact that “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay” (Romans 12:19). Our anger is not meant to be punitive, to get even. It is meant to do good first, and obviously, to the victims or potential victims of evil. And it is meant to do good second, sometimes not so obviously, to the perpetrators of evil. Anger motivates us to intervene to stop wrong, to protect the weak, to challenge tyrants (some of whom may sit before us in counseling offices), to reprove, to warn the unruly, to alert people to danger. But the dynamic of grace-giving and peacemaking must finally permeate our anger. Otherwise we are guilty of merciless judgment, of swiping at specks with boards lodged in our eyes.

Ephesians 4:29 is always true: “Let NO unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but ONLY such a word as is good for edification, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.” The perception of wrongdoing and the energies of anger do not entitle setting aside an injunction specifically written to *help* people dealing with displeasure at each other’s wrongdoings!<sup>29</sup> Even when (especially when!) dealing with gross sin or heresy, 2 Timothy 2:24-25 always applies: “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those in opposition.”

Jesus addressed His fiercest diatribe against the religious leaders in Jerusalem (Matthew 23). Anger gave His words focus, a sharp point, a cumulative impact. But He was not destroying people; He was helping. Jesus spoke to rescue those whom the leaders misled into legalistic self-righteousness and unbelief in the Christ who stood among them. And Jesus spoke to appeal to those leaders, warning them that they faced wrath, “Woe to you.” Even in this extreme instance of anger, Jesus did not inflict punishment. He was not being quarrelsome, unkind, false, impatient, fractious. When He bled on the cross, many leaders—Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Paul the apostle, and others—were included in His intercession,

“Father, forgive them,” and came under the blood of the Lamb who loved them.

There is a good reason why the limited punitive function God gives to man—the “sword”—is held in trust by the state for the general well-being. When the “king,” the office of the magistrate, punishes fairly, justice results. The greater the wrong, the more neces-

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*God and the devil are both angry all the time; on whose side is your anger?*

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sary punishment becomes and the *less* individual anger should play a part. When individual anger aims for punishment, vigilante justice results, injustice follows, and God is displeased. Let this question search you. Assuming your anger is appropriately aroused, are you expressing it constructively, to the glory of God? Or is your anger full of the peevishness, self-righteousness, and punitiveness of sinful anger?

I can think of one dramatic occasion when my anger was both intense and—as far as I know myself—simply righteous. This incident happened when I was a brand new Christian working in a mental hospital. One of the patients was a brooding hulk of a man, 6’ 4”, 260 pounds, with a history of violence. “John” waited until all the staff had gone off to lunch except me (hardly the Incredible Hulk) and a nurse who went about 4’10” and 95 pounds. He chose that time to go on a rampage. I heard the noise of furniture being broken up in the day room. As I came out of the nurse’s station, I beheld John trotting down the hall on a crash course with me, holding a huge television set over his head.

I became angry. Intensely angry. Maybe it was crazy to be angry and not afraid, but anger was what I was aware of. I don’t know where the booming voice came from, but suddenly I heard myself saying, “JOHN, PUT THAT DOWN AND GO TO YOUR ROOM!” My words were intense and forceful. I was dealing with wrong, and my response had energy in it, it had command, it had authority. The righteous anger produced amazing effects. John stopped in his tracks, put down the TV set, and meekly trotted down the hall to his room.

The next moment, still breathing heavily, I thought to myself, “Where did *that* come from? Thank you, God.” Once I calmed my heartbeat, I followed John down the hall to talk to him. We had a good talk. I didn’t nag him or moralize at him. He, in fact, proved

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<sup>28</sup>Matthew 7:1-5 and Luke 6:39-45.

<sup>29</sup>This is the emphasis both in the immediate context (4:25-5:2) and the larger context (from the beginning of chapter 4).

remorseful. As I've thought about that incident subsequently, the nature of righteous anger has come clearer. I didn't hate John. In fact it would be fairest to say I loved him, though I obviously "felt" no warm affection for him at the moment. I did him true good, even though I burned against his wrong. I wasn't out to get him. I didn't hold a grudge against him. My words weren't vindictive. Aggressive as they were, they aimed to solve the problem, to make peace. I didn't demean John. I wasn't holier-than-thou. No residue of bitterness remained. In fact, our relationship was strengthened. The anger was not inappropriate. It was appropriately aroused, based on accurate perception. It was appropriately expressed, intended to bring about the well-being of humans and the glory of God.

God doesn't often deal us heroic moments. But in the unheroic moments the same issues face us in a lower key. The stubborn teen? The sullen husband? The coworker running off at the mouth? The traffic jam? The committee veering off in a fruitless direction? The interruptions that never happen at the right time? "Something *wrong* is happening. How will I love? Will I return evil for evil or will my words be constructive? Whether forceful or mild, will my response give grace to those who hear?"

**Test #3: How long does your anger last?**

How else can you tell if anger is godly? One gauge is its duration. When anger lasts a day, a week, a decade, a lifetime, something has gone wrong. When anger settles into bitterness and hostility, the devil wins the game. We become like our oppressors, returning evil for evil. Ephesians states the principle memorably: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger" (4:26). To do so is to sin, as the first half of the verse bluntly informs us.

Anger can be clean and right. But God means grace to triumph in those whom He is remaking in His image. It doesn't mean we won't hate evil. It does mean we take seriously the daily prayer that states our need: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Do you get over your anger? Or does it fester? Do your attitudes towards people become poisoned with malice, disdain, condemnation? Where you keep short accounts on your own sins—including the manifold sins of anger—mercy will continually flow into your own life, making you merciful to others.

**Test #4: How controlled is your anger?**

Godly anger is emotion controlled by a purpose imposed on us by the Lord God. It is consistent with those fruits of the Spirit termed self-control, gentleness, and patience. Ungodly anger is emotion controlled by the impulses of our own hearts, and runs

out of control, harsh, easily provoked. Jay Adams put it well: "Anger is the emotion that has been given by God to attack problems.... The energies of anger [must be] productively released under control toward a problem. [Anger] must be directed toward destroying the problem, not toward destroying the person.... Anger, like a good horse, must be bridled."<sup>30</sup> Is your anger controlled by a godly agenda, by confidence in God's sovereignty, by submission to His purposes? Or is it out of God's control, unpredictable, vigilante, either abusive or brooding? Is your anger grace-giving or judgmental?

God's purposes through us are to give grace. Is your anger laced with mercy? You will be provoked. You can't avoid it: "Stumbling blocks are sure to come" (Luke 17:1). When your child mocks or defies you as a parent, you don't simply observe in a detached way, "Oh, that's interesting. Now, I believe I'm hearing and seeing something that perhaps fits the category of 'sin'. Why, yes indeed, as I think about it, that pattern of words seems inconsistent with obedient respect. Hmm, I wonder how I ought to handle it?" Oh no! You are made to react emotionally. A child is not supposed to mock his parents! The offense *rightly* pushes a button and arouses something in you.<sup>31</sup> Now, that anger easily becomes sinful, but it needn't. It can be bridled: "Let's deal with this." The anger provides energy to name clearly what was wrong, to discipline the child, to talk with him, comfort him, and give love to him. Anger is sinful and destructive if punitive, righteous and loving if disciplinary.

Does such self-control mean that your anger will not be as intense? This is a difficult question because the Bible does not make intensity a criterion. Cool disdain or mild disgust can express profoundly evil forms of "judgments against perceived evil." Genocide—literal or attitudinal—can occur without much emotion, rather like exterminating vermin or taking out the garbage. Such intense forms of hatred may be devoid of emotional heat, but are deeply evil. The aloofness of such "superior beings" simply dismisses those displeasing persons or points of view that fail

<sup>30</sup>Jay Adams, *What Do You Do When Anger Gets the Upper Hand?*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1975.

<sup>31</sup>Some parents, of course, have "buttons" that get pushed by things that aren't sin. They get angry over things that aren't wrong, or over minor infractions of family rules and customs. Their buttons are sinful. See Test #1. Some parents "go ballistic" when either their sinful buttons or the legitimate buttons are pushed. See Test #2. Some buttons were left 98% pushed in from something that happened last week, so parental anger is on a hair-trigger. See Test #3.

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their test of significant existence. In contrast, Jesus was “consumed” with anger when He drove the moneychangers out of His temple (John 2:17). Both then, and when condemning the Pharisees, Jesus seems to register up at about 10 on the Richter scale of emotional force. Yet His anger was always mastered by His devotion to God’s glory and the well-being of the people of God, just as it will be on the day when the “wrath of the Lamb” is revealed (Revelation 6:16f).

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### *The sinfulness or godliness of anger arises from the motive.*

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Perhaps it is fair to say that *much* of the intensity of anger will be greatly diminished when it is controlled by the Spirit, because so much anger is reckless, vengeful, and misguided. Merciful, patient, wise people simply don’t explode, while fools give full vent to their wrath (Proverbs 29:11). The wise maintain a humble self-suspicion regarding the validity of their anger: does it pass God’s tests? Similarly, *many* of the occasions of anger will disappear, because we won’t be aroused by the many things that trigger irritable anger. But all that said, there will always be some occasions for anger, and some of those occasions may call for strong feelings.

#### **Test #5: What motivates your anger?**

The sinfulness or godliness of anger arises from the motive. People motivated by desire for God’s glory, for personal conformity to Jesus’ model and will, and for the well-being of others will be angry in one way. People motivated by the “desires of body and mind” (Ephesians 2:3), by pride and false beliefs, will be angry in a different way. The simplest question to ask about what underlies anger is, “What do I really want?” If you are honest, with God’s help, you can recognize if you really crave to get even, or to hurt someone, or not to be inconvenienced, or to prove someone wrong, or to score points, or to be recognized and appreciated, or to humiliate, or to win, or to get your way. You are ruled by what the Bible terms “self.” And, with God’s help, you can also recognize if you really want the Lord of life to be honored in word, deed, attitude, and intention. The counsel of brothers and sisters can help us sort things through when we are blind to something and can’t figure it out. Counsel can help us when we deceive ourselves about our motives, dressing up something unsavory as though it were God’s will.

One of the delightful things about counseling angry people—and sorting out your own anger—is that the link between root and fruit is so accessible. For instance, how would you respond if, after you asked a reasonable question, I derided your question as stupid, slapped you across the face, and called you a dirty name? You would feel pain, shock, dismay, humiliation, anger, perhaps fear. Where would it go? Glory be to God if the sense of being wronged motivated you to confront me frankly, with a gentle spirit, intent on checking my folly and bringing me to my senses, confident that first I needed the grace of God and then your specific forgiveness. There is every likelihood that you were motivated by Christ Jesus above all else. If instead you grew bitter and brooded on schemes for revenge, there is every likelihood that you hunger and thirst for justice and respect more than for righteousness. What if you “struggled with” temptation to the latter response? Glory be to God if you struggled your way from the second response *towards* the first. God is honored and gives grace in the struggle towards righteousness just as in the accomplishment of righteousness.

#### **#6: Is your anger “primed and ready” to respond to another person’s habitual sins?**

Our brothers and sisters (let alone our enemies!) often repeat their sins over and over. Jesus spoke of “seventy times seven” and “seven times a day.”<sup>32</sup> Is your anger reaction equally repetitive? Repeated arguments—in which the verbal volleys follow the same scripted pattern time after time—reveal that something is wrong with your anger.

When issues get dealt with daily, my anger isn’t waiting to happen. The pump is not primed to react. A wrong done today does not lead me to drag out your criminal record of former transgressions. I won’t say, “How many times have I told you....If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times....You always....You never....Here we go again....I can’t believe that you did it again.” Godly anger is part of grace and peacemaking. Grace breaks the cycle of provocation-and-reaction so characteristic of life in a sinful world. Sins, including sinful anger, are usually repetitive. But godly anger starts fresh, because it keeps no record of wrongs. It keeps looking for how God is at work in the other person and in the situation, just as He is at work in me.

#### **#7: What is the effect of your anger?**

A final way to distinguish righteous anger from sinful anger is by the effects. Sinful anger creates more problems. It complicates matters. It hurts people, puts

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<sup>32</sup>Matthew 18:22 and Luke 17:4.

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them on the defensive. The way you come across tempts them to duck or retaliate. Your words are “rotten words” (Ephesians 4:29). That adjective was used for rotten fruit or rotten fish. If somebody were to eat your words—their condemning and belittling content, their tone of voice—they would gag. Rotten words are hard to stomach. Sinful anger creates vicious circles. Evil triggers evil triggers evil.

People may still duck or retaliate when faced with the just, accurate, and merciful words of godly anger. But you aren’t the occasion of stumbling; they are tempted simply by the sinfulness of their own hearts. Gracious words are sweet to the taste. Even when they contain tough truths, they breathe helpful intent. Godly anger is part of solving problems. Generally, righteous anger creates gracious circles. Evil triggers good triggers... what? You never know. Sometimes the insanity of sin is such that people actually do return evil for your good. But in the long run good overcomes evil. People often respond amazingly well to the truth spoken in love. Even when a person rebuffs you at first, the way you did things lodges in his mind. He can’t deny the simple good sense of what you said. He can’t deny the humility and lack of condemnation in your manner. You frustrate his attempt to defend himself by hurling accusations back at you. You didn’t treat him the way he treated you. That is the most powerful force on the planet.

Look at Jesus. Evil came at Him. Yes, His reproofs could be blunt and intense on occasion. He needed to be that way to show wrong for what it is, to protect God’s honor, and to serve the well-being of those poor in spirit who set their hopes on the Messiah. Yes, many people returned evil for His good. But He unmistakably loved His enemies. While we were enemies, Christ died for us. Christ, even in His anger, did not come to condemn the world but to save it. He came to turn offenders into friends. Evil triggers good triggers good.

Godly anger does not need to “win.” It does not have to succeed in bringing malefactors to justice. Its purposes are more modest on the surface, but more extravagant under the surface: the glory of God and the eternal well-being of God’s people. Godly anger

has good effects for all concerned. So when you are confronted with unrepented evil, when your best efforts seem to have had no good or lasting effect, you don’t have to become angrier. You can instead become more objective and matter-of-fact. On the inside, mercy works to soften your heart. Jesus would have you pray for their well-being, which includes their repentance unto life (Luke 6:28). On the outside, you are called to persistent, straightforward acts of unmerited kindness: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink” (Romans 12:20). Also, on the outside, you may be called to join with others in those corporate activities that impose objective consequences on wrong behavior: church discipline, withholding financial aid, severance from a job, an eviction notice, calling the police, criminal proceedings, enacting better laws, voting in new leaders, and the like. Such good activities are also “judgments against perceived evil,” but they operate in a more dispassionate mode. They are objective, sober necessities. They set limits on our more personal labors to help people. As such, they are a great comfort and good. It is often a great relief for a person facing persistent evil to know that others are also taking responsibility for making it right. It reduces the temptation towards vigilante action.

Anger is a moral matter. By its very nature it evaluates and seeks to destroy perceived wrong. By God’s very nature, our anger is always being evaluated.

These general statements about anger anchor our thinking. The Bible treats anger in rich detail through both examples and propositions. Anger is bodily, emotional, mental, and behavioral. It is decidedly interpersonal, always having to do with God and often having to do with other people. It is both natural and learned, for good and ill. It is a moral matter. God gives us a worldview from which to think about anger, and to wrestle with the diverse anger phenomena we encounter. Counseling applications have been scattered through the previous pages, and readers will likely draw many other applications. In the next issue we will consider some of the most important applications in greater detail.

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# Anger Part 2: Three Lies About Anger and the Transforming Truth

by David Powlison

What is anger? How should we handle it? Part 1 of this article<sup>1</sup> sought to provide biblical anchors for understanding this volatile experience. We saw that the Bible treats anger in rich detail. We saw that anger involves the whole person: body, emotions, mind, motives, and behavior. It has an interpersonal focus, always having to do with God and usually having to do with other people. It is both natural and learned, for good and ill. It is a moral matter. God gives us a worldview from which to think about anger, and within which to wrestle with the varied expressions of anger that we encounter.

In Part 2 we will critique three of the most pernicious misconceptions about anger that dominate our culture. As Christian counselors, we can offer the biblical alternative with all its depth, hope, and power to people enmeshed in lies. The truth provides a pathway out of anger and out of the confusion that surrounds anger. This part of the article will conclude with a set of eight questions that aid in assessing and overcoming anger in a godly way.

## Lie #1: Anger is Something Inside Me

One crucial implication of all we've discussed is that anger is not a "thing." It is a moral act of the whole person, not a "substance" or a "something" inside you. That might sound obvious, but most popular understandings of anger don't see it. Is anger a hot, emotional fluid that builds up pressure inside? Or is anger a demon that takes up residency? These common ideas—opposed to each other in every other way!—both agree that anger is a something.

In Western culture at large, many theories of anger see it as an emotional fluid that builds up pressure inside and must be released. This "hydraulic" theory of anger contributes to the pop wisdom that anger

"just is, neither good nor bad." Things *are* neutral; moral agents aren't. Why does this theory seem plausible? Because images such as the following capture something of what anger can feel like: A person's anger can be "pent up"; "his pump is primed." People can be "boiling mad," "filled" with anger, waiting to "explode." They "blow off steam." Old, unresolved anger can be "stored up inside," "harbored" for decades. If you "get it off your chest" until your anger is "spent," you feel better. All these metaphors persuasively depict anger as a pressurized substance inside us.

No doubt, these colorful descriptions *do* capture how anger feels. But a metaphor is not meant to overpower the thing it intends to illustrate. The writers of the Old and New Testaments, for example, didn't really believe that an inner furnace got stoked up to make you hot when you "burn" with anger. The "burning" metaphor graphically captures the sensation of anger and its effects, but it's not intended to cancel out the fact that anger is something people do. Anger feels fiery, but it's not a fire. The solution to sinful anger is not to surgically remove the furnace or to drink enough water to quench the fire! The solution is a moral one: to "turn" from sin to God's grace in repentant faith.

What do I mean if I say, "My angry neighbor growls, barks, snarls, and snaps at her kids; she chews and bites their heads off; she gets rabid and foams at the mouth"? Those are illuminating word pictures. But certainly I don't mean that she has an inner hydrophobic watchdog, and that the rabid canine within has taken over! In that case, the only solutions would be to muzzle her or to put her out of her misery. A mad dog is a "thing" that talking can't fix. But I've known snarlers who, by hearing God, repenting, believing, and obeying, grow peaceable.

When people believe that anger is a pressurized substance, something inside, not something they do, the idea points to a solution other than repentance. The need for some kind of catharsis seems logical. Counseling will seek to release pressure by "lancing the boil" (another metaphor!). "You have this hot stuff simmering inside you that needs to get out. Here's a pillow. Call it your Mom. Take this baseball bat and wallop the pillow, cursing her out for everything she did. You'll get the anger out of your system. You'll feel better, and you'll be fixed." The scenario sounds logical only if anger is a *thing* inside. But because anger is

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<sup>1</sup>"Understanding Anger," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 14:1 (Fall 1995), pp. 40-53.

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not a thing, but a moral act of the whole person, the scenario is sinful.<sup>2</sup> Anger is not a thing, so the true solution is self-understanding, an acknowledgment of wrong, repentance, faith, and new obedience by the power of God's grace.

The second way in which anger is visualized as a thing is seen in animistic cultures—and in some seg-

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*There's no reason that anger must be vented or exorcised to be truly resolved.*

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ments of contemporary Christian culture. In these settings, many people treat anger as a "demon." The logic is identical to the secular hydraulic model. Again, anger is *something* inside you. You will be fixed by getting the "thing" out of you, in this case by casting it out. Again, the theory seems plausible. Just as angry people boil, so anger, as much as any sin, makes us exactly like the devil. He is the accuser who usurps the throne of judgment, spouts half-truths and lies, and brings wrath against God and other people. The whole angry world lies in his power, and the devil seeks to mold us into his image. When you see (or are) a sinfully angry person, *voilà*, the devil's image is displayed. But the devil's hand in anger is no different from his involvement in any other sin. He does not demonize us into sin; he rules us. He tempts and lies in his attempt to control and destroy us. The solution lies not in exorcism from supposed demons of rage, anger, pride, and rebellion; it lies in *repentance* from rage, anger, pride, and rebellion, turning to the Lord of grace. Anger is a moral act, not an indwelling thing, and its solution is a moral act, too.<sup>3</sup>

Because anger is something that people *do* as moral agents, there's no reason that anger must be vented or exorcised to be truly resolved. Theories that liquify or demonize anger sound plausible because they draw on a vivid metaphor or on the arch-accuser lurking in the neighborhood. But they misconstrue

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that catharsis may not make people "feel better." Many things make angry people feel temporarily better that provide no real solution to moral problems: e.g., calming medication, eating junk food, orgasm, sleeping, watching TV, gossiping your story to get people on your side, screaming and hitting things, working out in the gym, getting away to Bermuda. Such things often do take the edge off, but they don't change the heart.

<sup>3</sup>See my *Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) for a more extensive critique of the notion of demons of anger.

what they see and lead people astray.

## Lie #2: It's Okay to be Angry at God

We've seen earlier that anger at God is commonplace. The Bible speaks of it scores of times.<sup>4</sup> It's one of the most logical human reactions, given the nature of sin, but it's a deadly wickedness. What Job's wife said was terrible advice, but at least she had her facts straight: "Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9).

Many popular psychologies discuss anger at God in a very unhelpful way. The standard advice runs something like this: "If you are angry at God you need to do four things. First, remember anger just is, it's neither good nor bad. It's okay to feel angry at God. He made us with angry emotions. Second, God often lets us down and disappoints us. How else can we explain being abused, and crying out to Him for deliverance, yet the abuse continued? If He's supposed to be in control, then He could have stopped it, and He didn't. Third, you need to ventilate your anger at God. He's a mature lover, and mature love can absorb the honest anger of the beloved. So don't be afraid to tell Him exactly what you feel and think. Many Psalms portray anger at God, so if other godly people have let out their rage at Him, you can too. Don't censor your feelings and language; say it like you feel it so you won't be a hypocrite. Fourth, you need to forgive God. Forgiveness is the opposite of anger, and you need to let go of the hostility to be at peace in yourself and to build a trusting relationship with God. Forgive Him for the ways He let you down." Plausible? Many find it so. Coherent? It does hang together. True? No way.

Anger at God is profitably examined by asking, "What do you want and believe?"—just as you would with any other instance of anger. What you will invariably find is that your heart is controlled by particular cravings and lies that have been substituted for the living and true God. For example, if I crave marriage and believe that God will reward my devotion to Him with a wife, my heart sets itself up for anger at God. Anger will come when the desire is not satisfied and the belief proves unwarranted.

Anger at God of the sort that is frequently seen in counseling is—virtually without exception (we'll discuss those "anger" Psalms in a moment)—sinful

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<sup>4</sup>Perhaps most vividly in the sustained hostility towards Jesus Christ the Son of God, and towards those forerunners and messengers of God who preceded and followed Him (especially David, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Paul). In the wilderness, grumbling expressed angry displeasure with God. In Proverbs 19:3 a foolish man "rages" against the Lord. In Revelation 16 it says three times that men "blasphemed God" rather than repenting.

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anger. It overflows with malice and mistrust towards God. It firmly embraces (and proclaims) lies about what He is like. It rationalizes any number of self-destructive and sinful behaviors. Anger at God presents a wonderful counseling opportunity. Handled rightly, it is the royal road into the evil disorder of the human heart. By the grace of God, those who are

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do we find a shred of evidence  
that God ever truly betrays us.*

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angry at Him can often discover for the first time who He actually is, and who they are as well.

Let's examine the therapeutic formula point by point. First, we've dealt with the fact that anger is not neutral. Anger towards God will either maliciously accuse Him or express living faith in Him. Those angry emotions with which we are "made" may be either godly or devilish. In contrast, the first piece of therapeutic advice entirely avoids the moral dilemma inherent in anger.

Second, does God let us down when we suffer? Nowhere in the Bible do we find a shred of evidence that God ever truly betrays us. The Bible discusses suffering constantly, but it always shows us that any apparent "betrayal" by God must be seen in the context of His larger purposes. Certainly, people may truly and seriously let us down. Abusers betray trust in such a heinous way that if hell has gradations, they merit the deepest pit.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the devil torments us. That's what he's about. Certainly suffering hurts—by definition. Anger towards tyrants and the arch-tyrant is heartily warranted. And groaning (to God, in faith and hope) about our sufferings is heartily warranted. *But God has never promised freedom from tears, mourning, crying, and pain—or from the evils that cause them—until the great day when life and joy triumph forever over death and misery.* The interweaving of God's glory and our well-being is far bigger than people imagine. Have God-ragers believed false promises or overlaid their

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<sup>5</sup>I'm citing a worst case scenario. Many people who are angry at God have suffered more mild hardships: disappointment in love, a financial reverse, the death of an aged parent, a proposal rejected at a church committee meeting. I've been struck that people who are angry at God have typically suffered the exact same hardships as people who love God!

own expectations upon God? Have they then become angry at a "disappointing" God, even confusing His actions and motives with Satan's and with evil people who imitate the devil's cruelty? It is curious how people who don't *really* believe in the sovereignty of God become hyper-Calvinists ("He could have changed things and didn't") when they are angry at Him. To *really* believe in God's sovereignty is to gain an unshakable foundation for trust in the midst of even hellish torments, let alone the milder pains.

The real God is the *deliverer* from tyrants, not the tyrant. He is the only hope of the "poor, afflicted, needy, unfortunate, and oppressed" who find themselves attacked in a world "filled with violence." And—a truth so profound that we can only say it with trembling—when we are honest with ourselves we realize that we are more like the tyrants than unlike them. The line between good and evil runs through *every* heart, except the heart of the Lamb of God. It's not that we deserved from others what they did to us. That was simply evil, and it will be repaid fully with the wrath of God (poured out either on tyrants or on Christ for those who repent). But that does not mean that we are thereby innocents. We also deserve wrath for our own sins. Jesus suffered the tortures we fairly deserve.

The anger at God that counselors often see *invariably* masks a deep self-righteousness and expresses blatant unbelief. Nowhere does the world's therapeutic formula challenge that self-righteousness and unbelief. Instead, it reinforces it (which is why so many find the therapeutic model so plausible and attractive!). Because it never talks about the sinfulness within anger at God, the therapeutic formula never can offer the only true hope for such strugglers: the sin-bearing Savior who will deliver His people from the condemnation and corruption of their own sins, and from the pain of other people's sins.

The Bible challenges the third point in the therapeutic formula, too. You do not need to ventilate your sinful anger at God in order to deal with it. You need to repent of it, like Job. You need to understand the demands, the false beliefs, the self-righteousness that produces and drives it. There is no psalm that encourages the kind of ventilation of hostile anger that the therapists encourage. In the "anger" psalms, without exception, what breathes through is an attitude of faith. Yes, there is true upset, complaint, hurt, and dismay. We can reverently call it righteous anger because it yearns for God's glory and the well-being of His people. Such loving anger yearns to have God, our only hope, eliminate the sufferings we currently experience. The intensity of the complaint arises from the

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intensity of the faith. It contains no cursing, no hateful bitterness, no lies, no scorn or hostile belittling, no blasphemies. Psalmists are dismayed because they know and trust that God is good, because they love Him, and because they struggle to reconcile His promises with current affliction.<sup>6</sup> Psalmists move *towards* God in honest faith, wrestling with their circumstances. But people angry at God shove Him away. Psalmists want God's glory and want evil to go away; they groan and complain in their faith. And typically (also ignored by the therapeutic counterfeit), they manifest an awareness of guilt and sin; they rec-

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ognize that suffering in general is somehow deserved. This is an awareness that coexists with hating the evil intents of those who afflict. When the Bible teaches us how to voice distress to God, it teaches a cry of faith, not a roar of blasphemous rage. The therapeutic alternative is too distorted ever to teach troubled people how and why to complain to a God they love.

Fourth, the notion of forgiving God is a final blasphemy in a string of blasphemies. Granted, the person who really deals with anger at God by repentance and faith will no longer feel angry at God. He feels overwhelming gratitude (another thing missing in the counterfeit) because he has *found* forgiveness, not because he has *granted* it. God is *good*. He does not need our forgiveness. He never stands in the dock as the accused, no matter how much our sinful anger seeks to put Him there. With whom does forgiveness begin, so that a trusting relationship between man and God can be rebuilt? Is it with us? Impossible. The therapeutic counterfeit gets this point, like the others, dead wrong.

The Psalms and Job do not provide biblical support for these trivializing and distorted ideas. Even Job, a godly man of honest faith, repented at the end for his strand of self-righteousness. To the degree that he had blamed God and sought to justify himself, he was brought to admit that he was wrong. That is what

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<sup>6</sup>Outside the Psalms, Habakkuk most poignantly does the same.

the book is *about*. The Psalms, when read in their entirety, don't say what they are alleged to say by those who take verses out of context to support a false idea.

Every step in the world's therapeutic formula is bent to one end: keeping man on the throne of pride. This therapeutic counterfeit justifies anger as neutral, blames God for being bad, ventilates hostility, and finally "forgives" the great Offender. It exhibits a shallowness of moral reasoning, a shallowness in even formulating the problem of evil (let alone wrestling with it), and a shallowness in engaging the Scriptures. It ought to make *Christian* people angry!<sup>7</sup>

The person who is honest about his or her anger at God—and gets to the truth about it—will walk a very different route from the one prescribed by the popular formula. The repentant and believing heart will not settle for some uneasy truce between my past sufferings and my current willingness to tolerate some sort of relationship with a God who let me down. The believing heart will find truth, joy, hope, and love unspeakable. The believing heart will find God.

### **Lie #3: My Big Problem is Anger at Myself**

Many of the problems just discussed reappear in current notions of self-forgiveness. If I'm angry at myself—and the phenomenon is a common one—current wisdom argues that I chiefly need to forgive myself.<sup>8</sup> Two truths typically are thought to motivate the self-angry to self-forgive. First, "God did not create junk, and since He created me I must be worth something." Second, "Jesus thought I was so valuable that He loved me and came to die for me." On the foundation of these affirmations I can feel good about myself, and view my failings more tolerantly. End result? I "forgive myself" instead of being angry at myself.<sup>9</sup> It sounds plausible to many people. But it's

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<sup>7</sup>Certainly passing the first test of righteous anger, being upset about things that hurt people and defame God. Such anger will also pass the other tests (see Part 1 of this article) if we love God and love people who are angry at God, wanting to give them real aid instead of lies.

<sup>8</sup>See the fine article by Robert Jones, "I Just Can't Forgive Myself: A Biblical Alternative to Self-forgiveness" that follows in this issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

<sup>9</sup>It is probably truer that the therapeutic goal is actually to "accept myself as basically OK, with understandable shortcomings like everyone else," not to "forgive myself." Forgiveness implies that something is so wrong that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). The self-forgiveness teaching inhabits the world of humanistic self-acceptance, not Christian forgiveness. The world of self-forgiveness is a world whose god plays the tolerant, worldly-wise grandfather. God is a loving Father with much better things in mind for His children!

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wholly misguided.

Why are people angry at themselves? First, invariably they have failed to live up to some standard. That's what anger is, a judgment against perceived wrong. That standard may be bogus—needing a house that looks like the pages of *House Beautiful*; getting straight As; being able to please an unpleasable parent; having a textbook quiet time. Or the standard

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### *Whose eyes are doing the judging when I am angry at myself?*

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may be accurate—committing adultery, having an abortion, laziness. In either case, there is something I believe I should live up to. I want to live up to it. But I fail. That's the first piece of insight in my self-understanding.

Second, anger always entails a judge, because they are the ones who make judgments. In the Old Testament metaphor, something can be displeasing either “in my eyes” or “in your eyes” or “in the eyes of the Lord.” Whose eyes are doing the judging when I am angry at myself? My own. I evaluate, and my judgment is final. This is why self-haters never get much satisfaction out of well-meaning attempts to help them believe in God's forgiveness in Christ. They may “already believe” that God has forgiven them for the messy house or the abortion, but it isn't enough: “I can't forgive *myself*.” And my eyes are all-important, more significant than God's.

It is worth noting that frequently people who “can't forgive themselves” serve both their own eyes and the eyes of others. I want my house to look impeccable to please myself (thus I displease myself when I fail) *and* to please or impress my mother and neighbors. When my house is messy, I loathe myself. I have failed on all counts, failing to please both myself and others. Or I may have accurate standards (abortion) but the wrong eyes. In my eyes I “can't forgive myself” for having had an abortion. How could I have done that? I must make up for it, or I must suffer for it. That is highly self-righteous on all sides of the intrapersonal transaction: I simultaneously play judge, criminal, and savior, and know nothing of the righteousness of Christ that makes the New Testament sing for joy. Typically, others' eyes again play a role parallel to my own eyes: I'm ashamed to have anyone know about the abortion. They might think ill of me. The Bible terms this the fear of man, substitut-

ing social opinion for the fear of the Lord. The eyes that self-haters live before are often a composite of what the Bible calls pride and the fear of man.

Third, when I set up the standard and the eyes that judge me, I also create my definition of a “savior.” To make up for my failure to meet my own (or others') standards, I may strive and fret to attain perfection. I work twice as hard at house-cleaning. I open my home to unwed mothers and compulsively minister in the pro-life movement. But it doesn't work. The house keeps getting messy, and no matter how good I am, the abortion still blots my past. I decide to keep trying to play my own savior by rebuilding a perfect record, which (if only I could do it) would make everything better. But I fail. So self-hatred always has the last say. I go endlessly back to dealing out my own punishment, playing the judge and the sacrificial lamb rolled into one. I lacerate myself mentally. I brood on regrets, self-recriminations, self-hatred, accusing myself mercilessly for my transgressions (imaginary or real). I'm angry at myself. I can't forgive myself.

Biblical counseling must approach such people at all three points: standards, “eyes,” and saviors. They live in a comprehensive counterfeit of biblical reality, which is why they are so confused and unhappy. Only truth can bring them wisdom and joy. Your goal is to redefine the reality in which they live, to state how life can be transformed by the renewing of the mind.

First, search out whether the standards people use to judge themselves are God's, their own, or ones that they borrowed from others (such as Mom and neighbors). Sometimes the standards will be accurate; many times the standards will be distorted and can be challenged and changed in the light of truth.

Second, whose eyes supremely matter? Whose approval matters? To live before my own eyes is to substitute my conscience for God. This is an act of pride. To live before other's eyes—for their approval—is to substitute their evaluation for God's. This is an act of man-fearing. To live in God's eyes is the beginning of wisdom. The self-hater who awakens to this awakens to reality. He becomes aware of sins he never suspected and of his real need for forgiveness.

Third, who is the proposed savior from all this chaos and misery? Does the person look to his own efforts to find a way of perfection? Does he punish himself for the guilt of his perceived failures? Jesus Christ alone gives perfection; He alone can bear guilt. He can forgive the varied sins that are present: genuine transgressions (adultery, abortion, laziness), the trust and faith in false standards (*House Beautiful*), the choice to live before eyes other than God's (my own and Mom's), and the pursuit of a self-attained right-

eousness as a false savior. Jesus gives a real righteousness—His own perfect life—to people who sin. He gives real forgiveness—His perfect self-sacrifice to bear our punishment—to people who sin. He gives indwelling power—His Holy Spirit—to renew our minds, give us joy, and change us. What a relief from the stifling self-absorption of self-forgiveness schemes.

Self-haters will find their problems resolved as they work this through. There are no loose ends in God's loving truth. Living for *House Beautiful* will recede into the background as a nervous, petty folly from which God has delightfully delivered me. The abortion was truly forgiven, not because I made amends or punished myself, but because Jesus loved a sinner. The pride and fear of man that elevated myself and other people to the judge's bench are replaced by the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. The legalistic perfectionism of my efforts at success and the self-punishment of my anger at self are replaced by gratitude for the grace of God. Case closed, no longer "angry at myself," yet not a whiff of "I need to forgive myself."

Notice, by the way, how the false analysis (Angry at yourself? Forgive yourself.) led to a false gospel, just as it did when we considered anger at God. In the biblical scenario, there is no hint of "You are worth so much because of creation, and Jesus' love shows how valuable you are, so you can feel OK about yourself." The truth is, creation and redemption don't give us much reason to feel good about ourselves. Our creation was in the image of the God of glory. Yet look how far we have fallen: "The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts while they live."<sup>10</sup> An honest look at our glory in creation "stops every mouth... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Similarly, our redemption was won in a way that displays how utterly bad and helpless we are. The only good and worthy Man freely died for ungodly, weak, sinful enemies. Those facts hardly offer a reason for confident self-acceptance and self-forgiveness! Grace, by definition, ruins self-worth. The covert pride that inhabits "low self-esteem" and "anger at myself" is not cured by misaffirming me as valuable. The biblical gospel points us to the worth of Jesus Christ, who redeemed the unworthy and deservedly damned. How much better is this real gospel, which defines our need for forgiveness from *God* (not ourselves), and provides it, full and free. People who embrace God's grace become

<sup>10</sup>Ecclesiastes 9:3; cf. other analyses of the human moral condition such as Genesis 6:5, Jeremiah 17:9, and Romans 3.

truly happy, free of the need for props to their wobbly self-concept. An accurate, biblical self-knowledge destroys the supposed need for self-esteem. It produces the only people on the planet with reasons for confidence as they approach life.

The idea of forgiving yourself to resolve anger at yourself actually panders to a core sin: it keeps people living before the wrong eyes—their own. "I'm angry at myself; I need to forgive myself." That airless psychic closet is a far cry from the real world that the Bible frees us to live in. For example, in 1 Corinthians

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*The truth is, creation and redemption  
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good about ourselves.*

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4:3-5, Paul says that it doesn't matter what other people think of him: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court." He doesn't live in the eyes of others. Then he says it doesn't matter what he thinks of himself: "Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." He doesn't live in his own eyes. Finally he says, "It is the Lord who judges me," and goes on to discuss what it means to live in God's eyes. My opinion of myself ("conscience") and your opinion of me ("reputation") don't matter unless they conform to God's opinion of me. They are extremely valuable when they stay in their place; they are tyrants when they seize the throne.

Anger at self, like anger at God, comes to a rich and satisfying resolution when understood rightly and when the Gospel is applied. The counterfeits that are frequently offered to troubled people are enough to make Christians weep with grief and anger.

### **A Pathway Out of Anger**

Let's move in a positive direction. How can we take the biblical teaching on anger to help us change? That's the payoff question. All that we've looked at thus far can be summarized in eight very practical questions. The first four questions help assess anger; the second four lead to resolution.<sup>11</sup>

Let me use as an example a simple situation that tempts many (all?) of us to get angry. You're in a traf-

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<sup>11</sup>This basic framework applies to other problems besides anger. It is simply a summary of the biblical pattern of change.

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fic jam and running late for an important appointment. It's five minutes before noon. The appointment is for noon. You are stuck on the highway ten miles away, in traffic that has not moved for twenty minutes and shows no sign of unsnarling. One common response? *You* snarl—with anger, frustration, disgust, dismay, unhappiness, tension. When you do, ask yourself these questions.

**Question #1: What is the situation?**

This one is easy. What is the provoking situation? Anger is provoked, it has a trigger, it happens for reasons in specific times and places. What is happening to you? "I was not tempted to anger until I was stuck in the traffic jam, and the clock was ticking towards noon, and I knew I'd be late for my appointment." The significant situation includes the Department of Transportation that decided to do road work at that exact moment, the traffic, the time, the appointment, the possible reaction of the person waiting for you, and so forth.

**Question #2: How do I react?**

This question is also relatively easy. It is meant to help you identify the specific ways you express sinful anger. What is happening in your thought life? Mentally curse the transportation department. Play out anxious mental scenarios of how to make my excuses to the person I'm leaving in the lurch. Self-recrimination perhaps: "Why didn't I leave earlier, or take a different route, or listen to the traffic report on the radio? What if the person I'm supposed to meet gets disgusted with me?" Where is God in all this? Perhaps I've cursed, invoking His wrath to serve my frustrations. Perhaps I've had a fleeting thought that "I ought to... or I shouldn't..." but that doesn't slow the runaway train. Perhaps I've thought angry thoughts about God, "Christianity doesn't work; God's a joke; what's the use?"

Body and emotions? I feel angry, irritated, hot. The longer I sit here the more I feel steam coming out my ears. I feel tense. Back of the neck is tightening. Stomach is churning. Anxiety about missing the meeting.

Actions? Creep up to the bumper ahead and don't let anyone merge from the sides. Strike my fist on the dashboard. Groans, sighs, hisses. Vent my disgust, "I can't believe it! This is ridiculous! Of all the...." Flip the radio on and off aggressively. An obscene gesture or phrase. Drive like a maniac once the traffic clears. A semi-coherent outburst of anger and excuses when I finally arrive at the appointment.

This stew of anger (and some fear) is a classic "works of the flesh" human reaction.

**Question #3: What are my motives?**

I'm grumbling and complaining, so some set of cravings and false beliefs must be driving me. Ask basic questions: What do I really want? What do I really believe? The anger comes out of my heart; it's not caused by the situation.<sup>12</sup> Here are some possible rulers of the heart:

- "I want to get where I want to go when I want to get there." That's unalloyed pride.
- "What will the people think of me? I was late once before." Fear of man.

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*Anger has consequences. It creates feedback loops, vicious circles.*

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- "I want and need the money this sales call was sure to produce" (or the cure that doctor was sure to provide; or the love that person was sure to give me; or...). Varied cravings ("I want") and false beliefs ("I need") regarding money, medicine, love.

When these cravings (classic "lusts of the flesh") and false beliefs rule my life, they produce sinful anger. If God ruled my life, these natural affections would be subordinated. I might feel some disappointment, but wouldn't be floundering in the swamp.

**Question #4: What are the consequences?**

Anger has consequences. It creates feedback loops, vicious circles. Perhaps as drivers aggressively edge forward, I grind into the car next to me and get an earful of the driver's hostility and a \$250 charge on the deductible of my collision insurance. Perhaps I reap emotional and physical consequences: guilt, increasing distress and tension, stomachache and headache. Sometimes the consequences are fatal: the obscene gesture leads to the recipient pulling a gun and firing. Perhaps when I finally arrive at the appointment I'm so hot, bothered, flustered, and full of excuses that I make a terrible impression and lose the sale (or girlfriend). Maybe the immature way I act blows my reputation with the doctor's entire office staff, and they have twenty minutes of sarcastic humor behind my

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<sup>12</sup>After all, if I had really wanted to avoid the appointment, I would be delighted at being stuck in traffic with a great excuse! Sinful happiness is a problem for which people rarely seek counsel. The Bible abounds with examples of people who rejoice at getting what their evil hearts crave (e.g., Psalm 73:3-12; Jeremiah 50:11; Habakkuk 1:15; Luke 6:24-26 and 16:19, 25; Revelation 11:10).

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back. "My day is ruined."

The first four questions have identified and dissected the anger reaction. They point out the specific provocation, the detailed stew of reactions, the underlying motives, and the consequences. We've glimpsed, even in this tiny incident, the vicious circles that define "sin and misery." The next four questions move towards biblical resolution by the grace of the God who has been peering into what's been going on the whole time.

#### *Question #5: What is true?*

Who is God? What does He say? Many biblical themes and truths may be significant, but I will concentrate on three that are always important when dealing with anger. First, God is present and in control of this and every other situation. His sovereignty surrounds the things I face in Question #1. I am not meant to control the world, but that does not mean that the world is random and out of control. You will solve sinful anger as you learn to believe, "God is extremely relevant when I'm stuck in traffic and running late. He is present and He is up to something good in my life as His child. God's overriding purpose is to remake me into the image of Jesus Christ, to make me a person slow to anger and full of trust, to make me a peacemaker not a warmaker. I don't like the fact that my appointment must be scrubbed, but God has handed me a perfect opportunity to become a different sort of person."

Second, God's law speaks to events such as this. The law acts in two ways, as a mirror and a lamp. First, God holds up a mirror to me: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." That first great commandment lays bare my heart: What did I love instead? I got annoyed because I loved my way, human approval, and money (or health, or love). This command diagnoses the things I found out about myself in Question #3. In fact, it taught me to ask those sorts of questions! The second great commandment lays bare my fruits. What works of the flesh emerged from the cravings of the flesh? The sinful reactions of Question #2 are exposed for what they are. I'm even taught what kinds of things to look for by the multitude of biblical examples and precepts that illuminate this command.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Of course the Bible doesn't need to or claim to list every single detail. It teaches us what sinful anger looks like and gives us numerous examples, making us wise to discern other examples. For example, I don't need a proof text to know that the act of "buying *Penthouse* and masturbating as

God also holds out the law as a lamp to guide me. The first great commandment tells me to love (and trust, fear, hope in, turn to...) God. I can trust His provision for me financially (or for health, or friendship/marriage) instead of lusting after these things. I can love Him for bringing wisdom's clarity and sense into a situation that was previously an emotional swamp. It tells me how to meet and know God (Ques-

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#### *The gospel is the bridge between the law as mirror and the law as lamp.*

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tion #6, below). The second great commandment speaks positively of considering the interests of others. How will that apply? I could be charitable as the traffic merges, and let someone in. Perhaps courtesy would have me make a phone call (if possible) to let the person waiting for me know the situation. This command speaks of patience, and of numerous other good fruits which will apply in different life situations. It reminds me to tell the truth when I tell people what happened. It challenges me to gain the wisdom I need to apply God's will into this exact situation—at 11:55 a.m. when stuck in traffic and late for an appointment (Question #7, below).

Third, God's truth speaks of the gospel. I have been convicted of violating the first and second great commandments in this small incident on the highway. These are sins. And the gospel is the bridge between the law as mirror and the law as lamp, between the chaos of sin and the joys of wisdom. The gospel forgives sins, restores me to God, provides power to be different, and gives hope bigger than the disappointments of life. God is a very present help in trouble,

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a temper tantrum at God" expresses sinful anger. Such an analysis is implicit in "The works of the flesh are evident, [give 15 examples...], and things like these" (Galatians 5:19-21). That passage and others give us enough variations on the theme of anger to enable us to get the picture. Scripture orients us to reality, teaching us how to observe and think about our world accurately.

Sometimes the view that Scripture is "sufficient" for counseling is caricatured by opponents, as if it means Scripture contains all the facts with which counseling works. This is an absurd view held by no person in the history of the world. Instead, Scripture is sufficient to interpret all the facts with which counseling works. If Scripture were exhaustively encyclopedic, we could not even ask a person his name and get to know the details of his life! But biblical categories *will* map on to those idiosyncratic details—sufficiently, perfectly, and wisely.

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and can give me grace to act peacefully and charitably as I ride out the traffic jam. I can know and rejoice afresh in the inexpressible gift of the love of God.

**Question #6: How can I turn to God for help? Do it.**

Question #5 laid out the worldview in which problems now make sense. God is revealed, and the way of escape from folly into wisdom is made clear. Mere analysis, however, even the clearest thinking (something Questions #1-5 seek to bring about), won't change me. Question #6 gets me moving. God means me to seek Him, to transact with Him. I need to apply the truths of Question #5, for example working through the questions distinguishing righteous and sinful anger. It's not hard to tell that my anger fails the first test of righteous anger<sup>14</sup>: this traffic jam is *not* a moral evil demanding the energies of anger. My sinful anger has asserted that lie because I served the false gods identified in Question #3. I need to repent, turning from the cravings and works of the flesh to the Lord of life. I need to confess my sins, ask forgiveness, believe the gospel, ask for the wisdom to know how to respond and the power to do it. The results of all this will be the clear-mindedness of "coming to my right mind." I will know genuine gratitude to God, and contentment (still in the traffic jam, no less) that was inconceivable while I soaked in my sins. Thank you, God, for who You are, for the goodness of Your gospel that has met me right here in my need! "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom... she is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire compares with her" (Proverbs 3:13, 15). I am experiencing the blessing of wanting wisdom more than my way or impressing people or getting money or the other things that threw me into a fluster.

**Question #7: How should I respond in this situation to glorify God? Do it.**

Repentance and faith lead to concrete changes in behavior, emotion, thoughts. Righteousness is just as specific as the sins described in Question #2. At the simplest level, I may simply take a deep breath and relax, trusting that God is indeed in control. But God has other fruits in mind, too. I become a charitable, courteous driver. What does it matter if I'm two more car lengths behind? I'll let a couple of cars in. God has set me free of both the hostile and competitive aspects of sinful anger. The traffic jam is no longer a dog-eat-dog battle. I offer thanks to God. I plan what I will say to the person I've stood up: not anxious excuse-mak-

ing or blustering irritation, but the simple facts and a concern for their welfare. I'll plan to apologize for the inconvenience. (I won't ask forgiveness, that's for when I sin against someone; apologies are for accidents. If I had left fifteen minutes late in the first place, then seeking forgiveness for inconsiderateness would be called for.) What a joy to be free of the emotional chaos of sin. Instead of that mix of anger, anxiety, confusion, and disgruntlement, I'm peaceful with the grateful "peace which passes understanding" and

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*Godliness creates gracious circles.*

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"secret of contentment" that come from living in the light of the gospel. Question #7 tackles every aspect of the situation described in Question #1, and walks out the will of God in detail in my world.

**Question #8: What are the consequences of faith and obedience?**

We've already mentioned some of the subjective benefits. More objectively, maybe a dented fender or even a killing got prevented. Somebody else was kept from stumbling into sinful anger or murder on my account. And in my corner of the world, the half dozen cars around me, maybe my courtesy and relaxed response proves catching. Godliness creates gracious circles. Here we come full circle and find that godliness, while not guaranteed to change the original situation, often has an effect for good on the world. Maybe I end up making the sale anyway because the manager is so impressed at the calm, reasonable way in which I handled a frustrating situation. He'd seen too many other salesmen come in spouting excuses and coming on strong. Godliness intrigued and attracted him.

The possibilities for the many-sided blessings of God are endless. Instead of my day being ruined, God has extricated me from sin and misery, and this is perhaps one of the most significant days in my life from the standpoint of growing into the image of Christ. I've learned how life works in God's world. I've learned how the gospel works. I've learned profound lessons in a very tiny corner of life. And perhaps when I talk to a troubled, distraught friend that evening on the phone, I'm able to "comfort those in any affliction with the comfort with which I have been comforted by Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:4). I didn't suffer much—the inconvenience of a traffic jam—and maybe he or she is suffering a great deal. But the dynamic of the human

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<sup>14</sup>See the first part of this article, "Understanding Anger," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 14:1 (Fall, 1995), pp. 40-53.

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heart is identical: I will understand my friend's temptations to anger, fear, and despair because I've understood my own. And I've come to understand the way of escape. Walking this through has not only blessed me, but has made me able to wisely counsel others.

A traffic jam—that's only a tiny case study. Some people might ask, "What does this have to do with major afflictions and major provocations to anger?" In the way the Bible views things, it has everything to do with them. The same truths about God apply in the same way. Sure, many details will differ. And the Bible is frank: there are tears that won't be wiped away and enemies who won't be out of the way until the last day. Question #8 does not create heaven on earth. But it creates tastes of heaven, even though the last enemy has not yet been put under Christ's feet. If on the day

I see Christ I will be made completely like Him, then in a small way I taste the joy of heaven in a traffic jam by being made a bit more like Him. These eight questions orient us to *Christian* reality, which is to say, they orient us to reality! They teach us about our world, ourselves, our God, how to live. People whom God teaches how to handle traffic jams, He will teach how to handle anything.

[Part 3 of this article, "Helping Angry People," will focus on the process of offering counsel to angry people. It will appear in the next issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, God willing. Isn't it interesting how that last phrase can keep readers, author, and editors alike from sinful anger should something interfere with those plans!]

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# Getting to the Heart of Conflict: Anger, Part 3

By David Powlison

Conflict concerns all of us: you, me, the people with whom we live and work. This is the third in a series of articles on anger problems,<sup>1</sup> but this time we'll broaden the subject beyond anger, *per se*. Anger problems are only one strand in the larger problem of interpersonal conflict. Yes, angry actions and emotions often seize center stage in conflicts, but an extended family of reactions each play their part in the real-life drama: fear, hurt, self-pity, gossip, avoidance, escapist comfort-seeking, lying, manipulation, even perverse joy.

To understand and solve anger problems, we must deal with conflict in all its forms. People fight with each other and with God; sinful anger is but one of the weapons. We fight our neighbors and our Ruler, both by nature and by nurture. As sinners, we *naturally* contend for our presumed self-interest. We also *learn* how to fight more effectively by extensive and intensive practice. And we learn from others, both by experiencing their hostilities and by watching how they fight. Each of us is a "quick study" because we have the aptitude!

Warmaking is a prime trait of sinners. It's the image of Satan: liar, murderer, divider, aggressor. Peacemaking is about God in Christ and about human beings renewed in His image. The Lord is the supreme Peacemaker. Even in His common grace, God inhibits the outworking of evil's logic, often preventing human life from disintegrating into anarchy and barbarity. Those forms of partial peace negotiated and

sustained by diplomats, mediators, counselors, and other well-intended people are gifts of common grace. But God's special grace is even more profoundly about peacemaking. Warlike humans surrender to Christ. He made peace once for all between us and God; He continues to make peace, teaching us to do the same with each other; and He will make peace, finally and forever.

This article will weave together several things. First, we will look at the Scriptures, and several key truths the Lord teaches us about war and peace. This involves asking the questions, "When *God* looks at your conflicts, what does He see?," and "How does *God* make right what is wrong?" The Scriptures reveal God's gaze, the criteria by which He continually evaluates human life, and they also reveal the means by which human problems are redeemed. I will also encourage you to look at yourself, and will give tools for pursuing change. What do you do that perpetuates conflict? Why do you fight? How can you pursue reconciliation? Real change happens when biblical truth and personal honesty intersect in repentance, faith, and obedience.

## Looking into the Mirror of Scripture

Let's begin with Scripture. The Bible is packed with stories and teachings about anger, conflict, and alienation—and how to solve such problems. Anything the Bible discusses frequently must be a universal struggle. We may each put our own spin on sin, but the basic sins indwell us all. For example, Titus 3:3 offers this general assessment of the human race outside Christ's rule: "Spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another." Not a pretty picture. Some people are more civilized about it, some

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<sup>1</sup>The first two parts of this series of articles on anger appeared in 14:1 (Fall 1995) and 14:2 (Winter 1996) of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. A fourth installment, dealing with counseling methodology, will follow.

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less, but all look out for Number One in some fundamental way, and collide with others looking out for the same thing.

Consider the representative “works of the flesh” that Paul lists in Galatians 5:19-21. More than half the items describe some aspect of conflict: “enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying.”<sup>2</sup> Consider also 1 Corinthians 10:13, “There is no temptation that has overtaken you

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### *The Lord is the supreme Peacemaker.*

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that is not common to all.” When it comes to interpersonal conflict, all of us are like participants in an AA meeting. Instead of, “My name is David and I’m an alcoholic,” we could well introduce ourselves, “My name is David – or Sally, Joe, Chung, José, or Lateesha – and I get into conflicts.”

Think about it this way. Imagine that you hold two fat, hardcover books, one in each hand. One book stands for you, the other for the person you quarrel with – your brother or sister, parent, child, spouse, roommate, pastor, coworker or boss, next door neighbor. Imagine that you bang the two books together. One closed book beats against the other. Two people go at it.

The battle may take a hundred forms. Maybe one party wheels out the heavy artillery of direct verbal or physical assault; maybe the other tends to run and hide. Some conflicts are mere skirmishes; others are all-out nuclear war. Maybe one or both parties go around enlisting allies: would-be counselors are prime candidates for such service. Appeasement appears as the strategy of choice in one situation, bullying in another. Maybe one person uses suicide bombs: “I’ll drink and mess up my life, and then *you* will feel bad.” Sometimes the arguments get nasty, like a 48-inch pipe gushing raw sewage. Other times it’s just a dripping faucet of derogatory attitudes and snide words: snip, snip, bicker, bicker, pick, pick. In any event, the two books collide. But in every case, the books are *closed*. Each party blames the other and feels the unassailable logic of self-righteousness and self-pity. Neither stops

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<sup>2</sup>The sins of conflict play a major part in every representative list of sins. See, for example, Romans 1:29-31, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8, and 2 Timothy 3:2-4. In the Ten Commandments, each of the horizontal sins – disrespect, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, coveting – can express some form of interpersonal conflict.

to open his own book and ask, Why am *I* fighting?

The Bible intends to separate the combatants and open the books.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit speaks and acts to bring intelligent conviction of sin. Consider Hebrews 4:12-13. All of us lie open, laid bare before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. God sees exactly what’s going on. His assessment is accurate and inarguable. The Word of God, living and active, discerns those thoughts and intentions of the heart that the Searcher of hearts sees and evaluates. What does He see when He “opens the books” of individuals in conflict?

We could look in many places, but James 3-4 is the classic, extended passage that speaks the mind of Christ to this issue. James 3 begins by reminding us that we are accountable for what we say. James, writing as the servant of God, notes the significance and power of the tongue: a small rudder sets the course of an entire ship. An unchecked tongue has devastating effects: a spark can ignite a forest. James exposes the hypocrisy of claiming to know God while attacking those made in His image.

Then, in James 3:13-4:12, the Holy Spirit summarizes the problem and solution: (1) The demanding, self-exalting heart will bear the fruit of chaos and conflict; (2) God is jealous for our loyalty, destroying his enemies, but gracious and generous to the repentant; (3) The wise, humble, receptive heart will bear fruit of a life of peacemaking. These themes appear in many variations. No more accurate, profound, and thorough analysis of the dynamics of conflict has ever been written. No more hopeful and condensed description of the dynamics of peace could be written. No more powerful promise of aid has ever been given. James 3-

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<sup>3</sup>As an aside, it is often desirable to counsel a husband-wife or family together. Both sides of the story are available; mutually provocative and reinforcing patterns of sin can be discerned; reconciliation can occur. However, I don’t believe that counselors must make it a matter of principle always to see people together. The principle of insisting on seeing people together sometimes arises from secular sources (the philosophy and habits of family systems therapy) and sometimes from Christian sources (a commitment to honor the corporate identity of marriage and family). I think there are times to separate the combatants, and to bring to the fore that each person stands accountable before the face of God. If a man and wife refuse to be constructive when together, separate them. Remember that some people use the counseling context as an occasion to perpetuate conflict and gather ammunition. Others use it to do surveillance, watching that the truth is suppressed, cowing the weaker partner into silence about what is really going on. With recalcitrant or manipulative people, don’t hesitate to dig in one-on-one (Matthew 18:15), and return to group meetings when they are committed to be constructive.

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4 places us in the light of the unrelenting gaze of God, and promises grace upon grace.

### Why Do You Fight?

For example, James 4:1-3 is intended to get each quarreling party to open his own book. James asks the question, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" *Why* do you fight? James does NOT say, "You are fighting because the other person is a blockhead; because your hormones are raging; because a demon of anger took up residence; because humans have an aggression gene hardwired in by our evolutionary

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*Nothing lies "deeper" than the lusts that lead to conflict. Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with God Himself for lordship.*

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history; because your father used to react in the same way; because core needs are not being met; because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed and had a bad day at work." Instead, James says, you fight because of "your desires that battle within you. You want something but don't get it." The biblical analysis is straightforward and cuts to the core. *You* fight for one reason: because you don't get what you want. It does "take two to tango." So why are *you* in the dance? You fight because *your* desire, what pleases or displeases *you*, what *you* long for and crave, is frustrated. When Scripture enters on the scene of conflict, the colliding books are no longer closed. Each is laid down on the table and opened up before God.

The world gropes after this truth and, at the same time, runs from it. Any secular marriage and family therapist can point out how people get into conflicts because of crossed "expectations." Such a therapist can often get people to articulate what their (perhaps previously unspoken) expectations really are. They may even help clients to evaluate and alter some of those expectations, thus creating a more harmonious climate. But the problem of self-centered craving is not really addressed. Clients simply find other, less problematic ways to get what they want. In any case, the conflicts that cry out for a repentant heart before God are dealt with by suppressing the truth of what is really going on. Secular counselors may be descriptively insightful, but they cannot see the anti-God drive that operates within such interpersonal "expectations."

tations."

The irony here is that, in my experience, people with a secularizing bent find the Bible too obvious and simplistic. "Of course" people get angry when they don't get what they want; there must be something "deeper" to really explain problems. But secular psychology misses the core issue; it plucks out its own eyes. The expectations that lead to conflict reveal something fundamental about where the combatants stand with respect not just to each other but to God Himself.

Contrary to secular assumptions, nothing lies "deeper" than the lusts that lead to conflict. Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with God Himself for lordship. No problem is more profound and more pervasive. James 4:1 says that such God-playing desires "battle" within us. This does not mean that desires battle *against* us or *with* each other. These are *our* desires, expressing who we are. The metaphor envisions siege warfare, an army digging in around the city. Our desires become entrenched... hence we fight and wage war. We *would* act as peacemakers if we obeyed the Lord instead of asserting our desires. But where you find quarrels and fights, you are witnessing people obeying the desires of a different lord.

### Who Are You When You Judge?

There is nothing superficial, obvious, or simplistic about the Bible's analysis. Combatants don't see the real problem. Neither do would-be counselors who try to explain and help them while ignoring the Bible. This understanding of the profound sin that drives interpersonal conflict is further explained by James 4:11-12. We judge others—criticize, nit-pick, nag, attack, condemn—because we literally play God. This is heinous. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor?" Who *are* you when you judge? None other than a God wannabe. In this we become like the Devil himself (no surprise that the Devil is mentioned in James 3:15 and 4:7). We act exactly like the adversary who seeks to usurp God's throne and who acts as the accuser of the brethren. When you and I fight, our minds become filled with accusations: your wrongs and my rights preoccupy me. We play the self-righteous judge in the mini-kingdoms we establish: "You are so stupid, cruel, insensitive, selfish. You've gotten in my way. You don't get it. You are a hindrance to my agenda."

What is an argument? In an argument, you offend ME by crossing my will. I respond by confessing your offenses to you. At the same time, I explain to you how all my failings are really your fault. If only you

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were different, I wouldn't be the way I am. You do the same to me, confessing my sins to me and excusing your own. Nowhere in the heat of conflict does anyone confess his *own* sins, except as a way to buy time for a counterattack: "Yeah, I was wrong to do that, but...." The log remains firmly planted in the eye (Matthew 7:1-5) as each party plays lawgiver and judge. "But there is one Lawgiver and Judge, He who

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*Two key themes lie at the heart  
of conflict: grasping demand  
and self-exaltation.*

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is able to save and to destroy. Who are you that you judge your neighbor?" Here we see that at the heart of interpersonal conflict, a far more profound conflict rages: the presumptuous sinner stands at odds with the one true God.

James 4:1 and 4:12 sound the two key themes that lie at the heart of conflict: grasping demand and self-exaltation.<sup>4</sup> Each of us says, in effect, "My will be done, and damn you if you cross me." To find God's solution to conflicts, you must ask and answer the questions, "What do I want?" and "How am I playing God in asserting my will?" Such a profound and explicit analysis of the "vertical dimension" in interpersonal conflict provides the key that begins to unlock it. As long as we remain only in the "horizontal dimension," there will be no genuine and lasting peace.

For this reason, all secular forms of peacemaking are inescapably shallow. Without the vertical dimension, at best one makes compromises born of "enlightened" and mutual self-interest. Humility before the living God and love for neighbor are impossible, and not even dreamed of. But where conviction of sin before God occurs, genuine peacemaking becomes not only possible but logical. Yes, the other person may

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<sup>4</sup>These themes weave through the entire passage. Sin's grasping, desiring quality is captured by "bitter zeal, pleasure, lust, envy, asking" (3:14, 16; 4:1-3). Sin's self-exalting quality is captured by "selfish ambition, pride, playing God" (3:14, 16; 4:6, 11-12). That sin is fundamentally an enmity and betrayal against God is captured by "adultery, friendship with the world, double-mindedness" (4:4, 8), as well as by the explicit usurpation that God-players attempt. That sin conforms to the image of Satan is captured by its "demonic" character and by the submission to the Devil that animates it (3:15; 4:7)

have started it; what he said and did to you may indeed be worse than what you said and did back. But when God opens the books, He shows you *your* participation in the conflict, what you bring, by the pride of your god-playing and willfulness. God's perspective reveals how the wills of two petty gods lie at the heart of those quarrels and fights.

### **Come Honestly to the Giver of Grace**

We have looked into Scripture, at how James relentlessly dissects conflict and opens up an unsuspected dimension. Now let's look more specifically at ourselves, and at the dynamics of grace. I would like to begin with a story. One of the first conflicts that my wife and I solved actually involved four small arguments in a row. That is significant in itself. You will find that many arguments are patterned. They are repeatedly triggered by the same sort of situation, and they play out the same themes, as if the two parties follow a script and act on cue. In our case, things got tense between Nan and me on four successive Sunday evenings in June. We had been married less than a year, and I was working as a summer intern in our church. Let me set the stage, first from my vantage point, and then from Nan's.

For me, Saturday was a busy, high-pressure day. I was focused on preparing for Sunday's events. Many activities would come to a head throughout that day. Sunday morning I got up early to finish preparing to preach, teach, and lead worship. The day was intense, filled with many responsibilities and with people, people, people. I'd talk with people, listen attentively, express care and concern, try to help, pray. I'd counsel both informally and formally. In the afternoon we often extended hospitality. I often had to preach in the evening or lead worship, so further preparations—both finalizing content and collecting my soul—would fill the late afternoon. After the last conversation had ended, Nan and I would get home about eight o'clock Sunday night. I had one thing on my mind: *rest*. I defined rest as the peace and quiet to savor the sports page, to sip a tall glass of iced guava juice, to nibble my way through a handful of Fig Newtons. I was ready to close up shop on relating to fellow human beings.

Meanwhile, what was Nan experiencing? For the previous two days she had supported her husband in all the things he had to do. She had prayed for each of my responsibilities, and had borne with my preoccupation. She had watched me talk with other people, offering them a seemingly endless supply of hospitality, patience, attentiveness, and biblical input in response to their needs and concerns. She, too, had

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been active in hospitality or teaching Sunday school. Now we finally had an opportunity to be together, an opportunity to talk intimately and personally, an opportunity to look at the week ahead and do some planning and praying. Come Sunday night at eight o'clock, Nan had one thing on her mind: *personal connecting*. She wanted a sympathetic and listening ear, someone to hear how *her* weekend had gone, to bear *her* burdens and share *her* joys, to walk arm-in-arm into the next week.

Do you get the picture? There's only one train track but two trains heading towards each other. The northbound and the southbound trains are due to collide at precisely eight o'clock Sunday evening when we arrive back home! You can see exactly what's going on in terms of James 3-4. Joe Pastor and Josephine Pastor's-wife are not a pretty picture at this moment. What was the cause of the quarrel, the unhappy bickering, the self-pitying sense of not being understood and loved, the self-righteous sense of offense? Is it not your pleasures, your cravings, the expectations that have dug in deep in your soul? I was ruled by my desire for pleasurable R & R. Nan was ruled by the desire for intimacy. The all-too-predictable result? A weekly quarrel.

A question immediately rises up in most minds, particularly in the participants to conflict. What's wrong with what I want? In the story above, isn't rest one of the commandments of God? What's wrong with wanting to enjoy the good gifts of food, drink, and leisure at the end of a long day, and before the week that lies ahead? Isn't sabbath refreshment, laying burdens down, one of God's good blessings? And isn't intimacy, a husband's nourishing and cherishing his wife, the mutuality of bearing burdens and sharing joys, one of the commandments of God? What's wrong with wanting your husband to care about you, too, along with all the other people he talked with at church? Isn't being loved one of God's good blessings? One of the things that keeps our books tightly closed is how plausible our desires seem to us.

### **(Too) Great Expectations**

*What's wrong with what I want?* Scripture, the Holy Spirit's X-ray of the heart, makes clear that when such desires *rule*, they produce sin, not love... and so they show themselves corrupt. God sees into the heart of conflict; He sees the private kingdom we each create. We each ascend to the throne, making our desires for blessings into the will of a god: I crave, I need, this must be. We each had fallen prey to sin's insanity and self-defeating futility. I was willing to quarrel in order to get peace and quiet! Nan was willing to quarrel in

order to get intimacy! Often it is not the *object* of a person's desire that is the problem; it is the "encampment" that corrupts. There is nothing *per se* wrong with wanting either rest or intimacy. But when I *want it too much*, when it rules me, I sin against the Ruler of heaven and earth. When our expectations dig in, we inevitably sin against each other, too. "I've gotta have it! It's mine! I demand my rights. I need to meet my needs. You're getting in the way of my precious, cherished longings! You're messing with my program to control reality. You're not meeting my expectations."

What do you want? How are you playing God? Those are not exotic questions, meant to send you on some introspective idol-hunt or an archeological investigation into shaping influences from your past. Ask the questions straightforwardly. They have an objective, present-time answer. You aren't probing for a subjective experience, a feeling, an elusive moment of insight. You want something as tangible and as fatal as Ebola virus: "What exactly do you want that makes you warlike, when Christ's rule would make you peaceable?" Answer honestly, and you will have identified WHY you participate in sinful conflict.<sup>5</sup> There are no deeper reasons for your sinful anger. Violation of the "first great commandment" is the deepest motive of all.<sup>6</sup> In moments of conflict I *loved* rest more

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<sup>5</sup>This is not an article on constructive conflict, one of the great joys of human existence. Constructive conflict does not destroy people and compound problems; it faces and solves problems, and has the net effect of building people up both individually and corporately (Ephesians 4:29). The first article in this series discussed the difference between righteous and sinful anger in detail. Much of that discussion can be adapted to the differences between destructive and constructive interpersonal conflict.

<sup>6</sup>Our culture abounds with attempts to find something "deeper" than our antipathy to the true God and compulsive self-assertion of substitute gods. Such "deeper causes" – unmet needs or longings, shaping experiences, genetic endowment, indwelling demons, the configuration of the stars, etc. – are typically attempts to evade the God-relatedness of all human life.

Of course, some factors that contribute to a conflict may have a history that long predates the present moment. For example, consider a man who was often manipulated, used, and misused by others in his past. He is currently ruled by a determination never to bend to another's will. It's as if he's "armed." A highly sensitive motion detector triggers alarm bells of panic at the mere hint that his wife might make a demand. Rage spews forth like a flame-thrower on a hair trigger when she even mildly disagrees with him. Understanding the historical antecedents helps explain *when* the craving for control entrenched itself in his heart, but doesn't explain *why* he is so volatile. The disproportionate intensity of present reactions arises from the heart's present cravings, but it certainly recalls previous experiences. Wise counseling will not only address present conflicts, but also will tack-

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than I loved the living God; Nan *loved* personal connecting more than she loved the living God. My outward sins in the situation included a grumbling attitude and critical words, but those works of the flesh erupted from the craving for my own utopian version of time off. Nan's outward sins included a grumbling attitude and critical words, but those sins poured out

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*I was willing to quarrel  
in order to get peace and quiet!*

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of the craving for her own paradise of marital intimacy.<sup>7</sup> For both of us—as for all of us—the horizontal sins register and express the vertical sins.

Those vertical sins are so serious that they merit the blunt labels the Spirit uses in James 3:13-4:12: “bad zeal and selfish ambition,” “pleasures, lusts, and envy” “adultery” against God (i.e., idolatry), “love of the world,” “pride,” “double-mindedness,” and “playing God.” We are meant to live with God on the throne, with a wide-open heart to Him and others. But a contentious, judgmental person has shriveled up inside, becoming closed and hard to both God and neighbor. In attempting to ascend to the throne of judgment and control reserved for God alone, he becomes perverted, corrupted, polluted. He becomes, in fact, Satanic. He acts in the image of the accuser of the brethren, an adversary of the well-being of others, an unlawful bringer of destruction, a tyrant and vigilante. On the outside, a contentious person speaks rotten words that tear down rather than build up, that deal out condemnation rather than give grace (Ephesians 4:29). On the inside, a person swept up in sinful anger has become demonic and diabolical—in the truest sense—an image-bearer of the great and wrathful critic of God's people (James 3:15, 4:7). God intends a different image, that we become bearers of mercy, redemption, and aid to others, even—particularly—in their sins.

What happens when warmakers come to see the

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le previously unresolved conflicts during which particular patterns of craving became hard-wired in the heart.

<sup>7</sup>This general pattern is explicitly stated in James 1:14f: specific sins are the fruit of specific lusts, and bring God's judgment. James 3:14-4:12 takes this pattern and works it in greater detail regarding the sins of interpersonal conflict. This article attempts to take that detailed pattern and work it into the personal details of real people having real problems.

significance and scope of this inner dimension of conflict? We are brought up short. We are humbled for specific sins before the face of God. The Searcher of hearts catches us by the collar and makes us look in the mirror. No wriggling away. Imagine glancing at a small, grainy, black-and-white photograph of the Grand Canyon, *circa* 1890. That's paying lip service to the idea that “specific sins are the fruit of specific lusts.” Now imagine actually standing at the canyon rim from pre-dawn darkness until the full light of day. At first you peer down into inky darkness. But as the sky slowly brightens, impenetrable darkness gradually gives way to gray. You begin to discern the shapes and contours of the abyss below. You see dimly what was right in front of you all along. That's what it's like to identify by name the specific lusts that characteristically produce your battles. Finally, as the sun breaks forth, the rocks begin to glow with every color of fire. The canyon blazes, and you see everything in vivid detail. That's specific conviction of what is true: “My anger at you—not only my cutting and defensive words, but the dismissive attitude, the negative, damning spin I put on everything you did, the positive, justifying spin I put on my own performance, the evasions, the gush of self-righteous and self-pitying emotions and thoughts, all these and more—expressed my diabolical pride against God and my restless demand for what I want.” James 3:14-4:12 has been overlaid upon the details of real life.

### **Pursuing Grace**

What happens next? James 4:6 makes a staggering promise: God gives more grace. God gives a greater grace. God gives grace to the humble. Grace is more and greater than sin. When god-players admit the truth, they find amazing grace in Jesus: forgiveness, mercy, sanity, a fresh start, cleansing, power, freedom.

Every facet of the grace of God is tailored to cleanse and renew angry, critical, fearful, proud people.<sup>8</sup> Those who are living deformed lives, the spitting image of the Devil, can find the “double cure.” In Jesus, those who seek will find forgiveness for such sins. The just anger of God will turn away from the sinfully angry, falling instead upon the only innocent man. In Jesus, those who ask will receive the Spirit who makes the dead alive and makes the warped

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<sup>8</sup>Interpersonal conflict is one of the archetypal sins, like overt religious idolatry, disrespect for authority, sexual immorality, theft, lying, drunkenness. Understand anger through God's eyes, and the cure of anger by Christ's gospel, and you'll understand how both sin and redemption work in practice. That understanding will generalize to all sorts of other problems.

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straight. They will be re-formed into the image of the Son who died for us that we might live for Him.

What must you do? Angry people must seek this God in repentant faith. James 4:6-10 says that over and over. The Lord proposes a radically “vertical” solution for the radically vertical problem of the heart. It is interesting how relentlessly God-centered this solution is. Submit to God and resist the devil, rather than *vice versa*. Draw near to God. The devil will flee and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands (from those outward expressions of sin, the “chaos and every evil practice,” the “quarrels and conflicts,” the “speaking against one another”). Purify your heart (from those inward defections, the double-mindedness that professes God but serves gods). Grieve over what you have done. Humble yourself in the presence of the Lord. Notice how *present* God is. Notice how *relational* the solution is. We need to seek and find Someone who will be gracious, Someone with the power to help us. To really solve the heart of conflict is to enter into God’s presence. If our conflicts were fueled by our usurping God’s place, peace will be produced as the grace of Jesus Christ reinstates God’s rule in our hearts.

James is distinctly unmodern in his solution to conflict! Moderns tend to talk about particular horizontal strategies: “clarify your expectations, listen well and repeat back what you’ve heard, phrase concerns and objections in non-condemnatory ways, count to ten before voicing anger, communicate respect for persons amid disagreement over issues, watch your body language.” There’s nothing necessarily wrong with these strategies. Properly defined, they may be timely applications of James 3:17-18. Standing alone, however, they are seriously inadequate. Although they tend to make for more harmonious social life, they skim right over the heart of the problem. James’ solution cuts to the core of what’s going on in conflict. Solving the “religious” core gives the recipient of grace the power and humility to pursue strategies that lead to genuine peace.

### Peaceable Wisdom

What does this look like interpersonally? Formerly angry people are enabled by God to give love and to make true peace. If you once attacked people, you learn to interact constructively. James 3:17-18 describes it compactly. God the gracious Giver gives “wisdom from above” (cf., 1:5, 1:17, 4:6). It is *wisdom*: practical, specific, walked out, talked out. It is a way of life, the opposite in every respect to the words, tone, thoughts, actions, and attitudes of sinful anger. And it is *from above*, the gift of God through the Lord

Jesus Christ. He alone gives the goods that truly solve interpersonal conflict. If you lack wisdom—and “quarrels and conflicts” are prime examples of folly—ask God (James 1:5).

This wisdom He gives is first *pure*. Angry people churn out mental, emotional, and verbal pollution. They plot ugly things; their hypocrisy condemns others’ failings while they themselves plunge headlong into spectacular sins. Contentious believers have

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### *People in conflict have distorted hearing and speaking.*

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hearts that are dangerously divided: impure. But repentant believers begin to live a life that is pure. Simple. Straight. Pursuing the good and true. Out for others’ welfare. Giving your life away. Not calculating self-interest in the background.

Godly wisdom is first pure, and “then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy.” How many more ways can James say it? *Peaceable* people have laid aside warlike traits: defensiveness, aggression, criticism, self-justification, scoring points, touchiness to offenses....These moral weeds—the “filthiness and remnant wickedness” that comes from the “anger of man” (James 1:20-21)—are plucked up by the roots and begin to wilt. Sweet fruit begins to grow as the Word of God and other good gifts take root: teachability, forbearance, kindness, concern that others look good, contentment and gratitude for the inexpressible gift, an outlook of charity rather than peevishness. May the Prince of peace make us “irenic” (the Greek word here), replacing our instinct for contentions, quarrels, and criticisms. Jesus Himself is peaceable, the incarnation of every facet of this wisdom from God.

The English language has no full-orbed equivalent for the word translated as *gentleness*. Jesus exhibited this trait so remarkably that its fragrance and coloration marked His entire life. Here walked the Lord of glory with His own creatures. Every human being that Jesus met owed Him life and utter loyalty. He is YHWH, to whom temple sacrifices were offered in repentance and gratitude. Yet most of these people ignored Jesus, misunderstood Him, tried to use Him, reviled Him, plotted against Him. Even His own intimate followers, who basically loved Him, repeatedly proved themselves dense as stones. How did He put

up with it for thirty-three years?! Gentleness.

Jesus dealt gently with the ignorant and misguided, even when He suffered at their hands. He was meek: a virtue almost beyond our imagination, the ability to endure injury with patience and without resentment. I have known several people in whom I saw demonstrated the first fruits of this virtue. Their lives showed hints of radiance, a glimpse of the unveiled glory of Jesus, the loveliest thing I've ever seen. Jesus was fundamentally and comprehensively kind, "going about doing good." We can understand to a degree that He was compassionate towards sufferers. But when we consider that the Christ's master purpose was self-sacrificing mercy for His enemies, here the gentleness of Jesus exceeds comprehension. George MacDonald once captured the fragrance of such gentleness this way: "It's a painful thing to be misjudged. But it's no more than God puts up with every hour of the day. But He is patient. So long as He knows He's in the right, He lets folk think what they like - 'til He has time to make them know better. Lord, make my heart clean within me, and then I'll care little for any judgment but yours!"<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" has become largely a phrase of mockery, picturing someone weak and ineffectual, a sentimental, pabulum savior for children. But may the God of the Lord Jesus Christ give us His true gentleness, making us meek and mild. Such incomparable, forbearing strength is a regal attribute. This glorious goodness—cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded—is precisely what James 3-4 intends to produce in you and in me, people so quick to take and cause offense.

The wisdom from above is also *reasonable*. It has never ceased to amaze me how reasonable Nan starts to sound once both she and I begin to repent of sinful anger. People in conflict have distorted hearing and speaking. We tune in to the same wavelength we broadcast on, and it's the wrong channel: I'll listen for and speak whatever proves you wrong and proves me right. But peaceable people send and receive on a different wavelength: what makes for growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wisdom makes sense. It's listenable, accurate, constructive, winsome—even when it says tough things. But angry people are insane and perverse. You don't talk sense when you are contentious; malice and distortion subvert and pervert even the attempts at truth. You can't talk sense with a contentious person. But you can say anything that's true and constructive to a wise

person and you'll get a fair hearing.

Naturally those who repent of an angry critical spirit become *full of mercy*. If I've found the mercy of Jesus overflowing towards me for spectacular and fatal sins, it's only natural for me to overflow at least a little with the same mercy towards others for their lesser sins against me.<sup>10</sup> The more deeply you get to the heart of your participation in conflict, the more you will understand with joy the mercy of God to you. And you'll become correspondingly merciful and patient towards others in their sins. If God has been so patient with me, I can be patient with my neighbor. Angry, critical, feisty, irritable people typically don't much understand this mercy of God. They can mouth the words, but their actions reveal that a lie inhabits

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*If God has been so patient with me,  
I can be patient with my neighbor.*

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their hearts. They still serve lusts. And others will pay the full price for perceived transgressions. It has been interesting and humbling for me to ask myself, "Towards whom am I full of mercy, and towards whom am I merciless?" I have to give a mixed answer: persons ABC are on the mercy list, and persons XYZ are on the merciless list. The difference between the two lists has little to do with the people's particular strengths and failings. It boils down to my "expectations," to whether I view that person through the lens of the Redeemer's merciful agenda or through the lens of my own instant and insistent demands. May God be so merciful as to make me and you persons with only the mercy list.

You will become *full of good fruits* also, as you learn to make peace rather than war. The good fruits of peacemaking are as diverse as the evil works of war-making. Scripture gives us no exhaustive list of good fruits. No list could ever capture the many creative, timely, and appropriate things that repentant people do and say as they learn to make peace. Keep your mouth shut, when you used to blurt out a reaction. Speak up courageously, when you used to get intimidated. Embed your criticism of another in both appropriate commendation and Christ-centered optimism. Treat people fairly, representing them accurately and recognizably, rather than misrepresenting them. Speak

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<sup>9</sup>George MacDonald, *The Marquis' Secret*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1982, p. 58.

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<sup>10</sup>Mercy can even flow towards those who did not sin personally against me, but whom I have treated mercilessly!

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accurately, abandoning prejudicial language; “always” and “never” are rarely true and usually more destructive than constructive. Speak calmly, rather than with gusts of inflammatory emotion. Speak strongly, rather than inhibited by timidity. Raise an issue you used to swallow. Overlook an offense you used to explode about. Solve the problem rather than attacking the person. Expect to see Christ at work, rather than despairing or panicking when troubles come. The gentle answer turns away wrath, replacing the harsh words that stir up anger. When you get the log out of your own eye, you really can see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

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*People in conflict are hypocrites.*

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Odds are, he’ll trust you as you do it, and he’ll love you for it. The cornucopia overflows.

James’ comment that peacemakers are *without partiality* is particularly striking, and points out something I’ve never heard discussed. I’ve noticed that when people repent of sinful anger they become able to discuss their own sins accurately – after all, such sins now exist in the light of Christ’s grace and will be progressively destroyed by grace. Simultaneously, they become able to talk about other people’s sins charitably. There is no more ax to grind, but an emerging desire for the well-being of the other in the hand of the merciful Redeemer. Impartial people become able to sort out who really contributed what to the overall problem. Such even-handedness stands in marked contrast with the polarization of conflict. I recently witnessed a wife discussing her own sins without defensiveness, and the sins of her husband without accusation. Simply, utterly amazing! They had been at each other’s throats, full of anger, disappointment, defensiveness, and self-pity only one week before. Changing her husband, punishing him, fearing him, getting one up on him were no longer her prerogative. She was free to get about the business of being a constructive help in the process, rather than a destructive hindrance.

Finally, peacemakers are *without hypocrisy*. They don’t stir up a whole evening of trouble and misery to get a few moments of peace and quiet; they don’t stir up an evening of hostility to get loving attention. They don’t judge others for Little League versions of sins against themselves, thereby committing major league versions of sins against God. People in conflict are

hypocrites. They deal out global condemnation, while screaming in outrage whenever they are mistakenly criticized regarding some tiny detail of a story. They grouse about a spouse spending \$20 on some perceived frivolity, while they don’t think twice about spending \$500 on their own hobbies. They damn others as theological nincompoops and biblical ignoramuses, while they themselves subscribe to theological “distinctives” that are at best dubious and at worst flat out wrong. They accuse others of harshness... harshly; they get angry at angry people; they haughtily judge proud people; they gossip about gossips. May God be merciful to us all. “And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?” (Romans 2:3). God gives more grace... to those who stop to look in the mirror and get to the heart of their participation in this world at war. That grace is effective to make real change, in real time, with real people, in real situations. He who is pure teaches us to purify ourselves. And the pure are without hypocrisy.

**Real Change in Real Life**

Just as God’s diagnosis maps onto real life, so we live out the cure into real life, real time. Nan and I talked differently after our “sunrise on the Grand Canyon” than we had talked before. Words came clothed in a different tone of voice. They carried a different attitude and intention. No longer adversaries and accusers, we began to talk honestly about our own failings. We began to love the love of Jesus, and to pray for each other, and to worship the Merciful One. There are three in our marriage, and one of us is perfect, good, and merciful. He’s at work. Wisdom is feet-on-the-ground, every-word-out-of-your-mouth practical. We were enabled to make practical, problem-solving decisions.

There is nothing so unromantic as love.<sup>11</sup> Romantic feelings of attraction and pleasure will sometimes be associated with love, but the essence of love is different: a commitment to act for another’s welfare. As we solved our Sunday night bickering, Nan actually *wanted* to give me rest, and I actually *wanted* to spend time with her and give her personal attention. We decided, as a matter of policy, to define Sunday night as a time of private rest, and to take Monday morning as a time of extended and open communication. Interestingly, as a matter of fact, over the rest of the summer, we ended up informally “connecting” on about half the Sunday evenings anyway. Somehow when

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<sup>11</sup>I am indebted to Andrée Seu for this phrase.

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the lust for R & R was dethroned, I didn't "need" private peace and quiet so much. And, not surprisingly, when the lust for intimacy was dethroned, a lot more intimacy just seemed to happen. Those typical surprises occur when people get to the heart of conflict and find the needed grace.

Does this mean we never bickered again? Would that it were so! But the burning cinder of iniquity must be extinguished daily (Luke 9:23), not once and done. During that summer almost twenty years ago, Nan and I were given a road map to the fountain of life and were enabled to find grace. We gained an enduring understanding of characteristic sin patterns, and tasted the joys of repentance and godliness. Such understandings are repeatedly beneficial. When we sin afresh, repentance is much less haphazard. We're familiar with what's going on. We know the terrain, and where to go. We needn't stumble around in the dark so long before seeking needed grace. Many potential conflicts have been nipped in the bud and turned into nourishing companionship. But we are far from perfection, even more aware of that fact than we were twenty years ago. On the day we see Christ, we will be like Him, all who are in Him. From that day on there will be no more causes of stumbling, no more "quarrels and conflicts." The process of getting to the heart of conflict will one day be finished. Simple and pure devotion will replace double-mindedness forever.

### **What Happens to the Closed Book?**

We've been looking at conflicts in the process of resolution. But what about people who refuse to see themselves, who continue to accuse others and excuse themselves? In effect, they pluck out their eyes. They attempt to keep their book shut tight, while bringing vigilante justice to those they hate. They won't look into the mirror of the Word illuminated by the Spirit. What happens when the "log" remains impaled in the eye? You remain a slave to your encamped desires: "If only my wife would change and see that I'm tired and need to rest....If only my husband would change and see that I'm lonely and need his love...." Irascible people remain incapable of love, digging ruts of bitterness, self-righteousness, self-pity, entitlement, unhappiness, perhaps escapism, perhaps that fruitless search for the greener pasture of lusts fulfilled.

I've done personal ministry for twenty years, and have spent thousands of hours talking with people. In that time, I've gotten to know some champions of anger, rage, self-righteousness, and the rest of the sordid clan. In my informal "Hall of Shame," the five angriest people each said something like this: "I'm not

*really* an angry person....I was really a nice guy until I met my wife/husband....I get along great with the people I work with. But that woman/man drives me crazy!" Such comments express deep darkness; he doesn't know over what he stumbles. Such a person really IS an angry person, contrary to self-perception.

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*Faith lives as though  
what God says is true.*

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That anger expresses cravings that Christ would expose and uproot. Praise be to God that His common grace has allowed such a person to be reasonably civil much of the time, rather than perpetually criminal. But "that woman/man" has been given to bring the heart into open display. The comment speaks volumes about a person's ignorance of reality, ignorance both of himself and of God. The spouse doubtless has sins, perhaps serious ones. But the angry person plays god, and in so doing plays the Devil, rather than letting God be God, and so embracing the Redeemer's agenda.

Leisure time and personal connecting—like control, money, vindication, power, success, being loved, health, significant accomplishment, and the like—are seductive and dangerous masters. When thwarted, their anger takes a thousand forms, sometimes showing its face openly, sometimes hiding. But when tyrant lusts are overthrown by grace, then rest, intimacy, and the like simply become good gifts. They are gifts to give away to others in the true freedom of the "golden rule"; they are gifts to enjoy when we receive them. They are nothing to live for, to claim, to need, to long for, to organize life around. God has good things in store for His children. The best gift is freedom from the guilt and dominion of sin in order to know God Himself. Along the way, He will give the true version of every lesser good sooner or later.

### **Walking by Faith**

In James 3-4 the Holy Spirit repeatedly calls us to stand before the mirror and to see what is true. He repeatedly beckons us with promises: "God gives more grace. He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Let those words be stamped on your heart. Faith takes God at His word. Imagine yourself down to the last \$100 in your savings account. The next wave of bills has arrived in the mail, and must be paid. That night your soul flutters with anxiety. You lie

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awake, mind running in circles, calculating and recalculating, planning and imagining. The next morning, out of the blue, your banker calls you and says, "Someone just wired \$10,000 into your account. The money's available, so live accordingly....Yes, it's in *your* account....No, there's been no mistake." Would you keep worrying? Or would you get about the business of paying your bills with a glad heart? Get about business.

Faith lives as though what God says is true.<sup>12</sup> God *does* give more grace to the humble. Humble yourself.

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*To get to the heart of conflict  
you must seek God.*

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God *does* oppose proud warmakers. Come out with your hands up and surrender. He *truly* forgives those who open their eyes to their sins. Stop, open your eyes, confess. He sealed His promise in the blood of Jesus. Count on it. He *actually* gives the Holy Spirit to His children who ask. Ask. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach" (James 1:5). Ask unafraid, knowing your need. "You do not have

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<sup>12</sup>I am indebted to Bob DeMoss for this phrase, and for the metaphor in the preceding paragraph.

because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask...to spend it on what pleases you" (James 4:3). Ask, repenting of your lusts. God Himself will empower fruit-bearing. He gives wisdom to walk in the image of Jesus Christ.

The humble faith that makes for peace is just as objective as the proud craving that makes for conflicts. Many people view faith as their *feelings* of trust, confidence, peacefulness, contentment, happiness. Many people view prayer as an *experience* of certain religiously colored emotions: fervency, stillness, joy, familiar comfort. Such feelings are sometimes associated with faith and prayer, but the Psalms illustrate how the faith that talks to God can express itself in many different feeling states, some pleasant, some rather unpleasant. And we should never forget that many forms of falsehood may feel peaceful or fervent or confident. The state of your emotions is no accurate register of whether you are actually relying on God.

The essence of living faith is something different than any particular experience: seek the true God who speaks truth. Faith takes God at His word and acts on it. There is nothing so unexperiential, unmystical, and unsentimental as faith. But robust, straightforward, simple faith is powerful. Relate your life to God in Christ, and He will rearrange your life. Take God at His word. To get to the heart of conflict you must seek God. And if you seek, you will find. And you'll change, because living faith can never prove fruitless: "the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:18).

# ANGER AND GOD'S GRACE: A CASE STUDY

*Anonymous*

Anger is one of my greatest problems. It typically erupts in harsh words in a torrent of speech, although at other times I withdraw and refuse to talk to anyone. My mind becomes confused, and I lose my sense of concentration. I feel low emotionally and even lose my appetite. At the time that I began my self-counseling project, these were standard responses when I became angry.

## Test #1

Soon after I had chosen anger for my project, I was invited to speak at a church conference. A free-will offering was taken for me, and at the end of the visit I was given an envelope which held nearly five hundred dollars in cash – the entire offering. I placed the envelope in my Bible and handed it to my wife. We stopped at a nearby restaurant for lunch and then made our way back towards home.

After about twenty minutes of driving, I asked my wife to put the envelope in her purse. She began to look frantically around the car and finally said, "I think I left the envelope and the Bible in the restaurant."

I slammed on the brakes, turned the car around, and sped back to the restaurant. When we arrived, we found our booth occupied by four new customers. We asked them if they'd seen our Bible, and they answered "No." The waitress had the same reply. In complete silence, my wife and I left the restaurant and sat in the car for half an hour. Then we again began our drive home.

From the moment my wife had given me the bad news, I had said nothing to her; but I was boiling inside. I wanted to express all the anger I felt and to make my wife aware of how stupid, careless, and irresponsible she had been. I actually hated my wife at that moment and did not even want to look at her. I wanted her to feel miserable, and I wanted to be alone to indulge my self-pity. As I careened down the road at over seventy miles an hour, I angrily told my wife that she had done a stupid thing.

## Turning Point

After some time I glanced over at her and saw tears running down her cheeks. I was not unmindful of the fact that I was being tested on my anger, the topic of my project. I knew that God wanted me to please and honor Him in my responses and to be loving and forgiving to my wife. I slowed down and gently squeezed my wife's arm. I prayed silently and asked God to forgive me for my harsh words to her. I confessed the evil thoughts and feelings that had been surging through me from the moment the loss had been discovered. I was aware that God had tailor-made this incident to allow me to see my own heart.

Later I drew my wife closer to me and asked her forgiveness for what I had said. I recalled an incident when I too had left something valuable in a public place and had never gotten it back. I told her that she meant more to me than the money that had been lost.

My wife was totally unprepared for the loving way I reacted. (That's not surprising since it was completely uncharacteristic of me.) She cried more tears and apologized again for what had

happened. Later she drew close to me and thanked me for being her husband. This time it was I who was unprepared for her reaction. I had never before handled my anger in a way that would deserve such a response.

## **Test #2**

About a month later I brought home a new television set for the family—something we'd all been anticipating. The next day my daughters were playing indoors and began running around the living room. Oblivious to everything but having fun, they ran into the TV table and knocked the new TV to the floor. The picture tube was cracked irreparably.

My old patterns of anger surfaced quickly. I was so enraged that I was tempted to strike the girls. I blamed their mother for her negligence in disciplining our children. I stormed out of the house and walked around the neighborhood for half an hour, deep in self-pity. I wanted my family to feel ashamed for making life hard for me when I was trying to make life easier for them.

But again, I was aware that God had tailor-made this incident to allow me to see my own heart. I realized that I had again sinned against my wife in the way I had spoken to her and that I had sinned against the girls too. I knew I had to live in such a way that they knew I loved them and that they meant more to me than money and material things.

## **Turning Point**

I went back to the house thankful for the walk, which had given me time to cool down, pray, and reflect on the value of material things versus the gifts of love, children, and family. I apologized to my wife for my accusations and later that evening we did two things.

During our family devotions we talked about the incident, and I spoke to the girls about their behavior. The goal for me was to do this lovingly and without talking about the cost of the television and how long it would take us to save for another one. Each person prayed and asked God for forgiveness for what he or she had done wrong in the incident. The second thing we did was establish some clear rules about acceptable play in the house!

## **The Fruit of Obedience**

What has happened since those incidents? I've been surprised and humbled to notice how much has changed, how much God has blessed my efforts to trust and obey Him. My wife and I talk more freely and openly than we ever have in our marriage. When something is bothering me, instead of exploding or retreating in silence, I am learning to talk it over with her and, in some cases, with my daughters. I feel much more love from my wife and am conscious of her desire to please me. This is happening at the same time that I am finding it easier to love and please her.

I sense a closeness in our whole family that was absent before. My children seem more relaxed with me, yet they take the responsibility to warn each other about getting too rough or wild in the house. When I discipline the girls, I can talk about the problem instead of venting my anger. In other words, I am respected and loved as a parent and no longer feared.

There were two other times after the TV incident when the girls broke something in the house (fortunately, not as valuable). They were sitting on the floor in their room, and I went in to talk with them about it. Their positive reaction was fun for me to watch, and it was also comforting to see the fruit that my obedience to God can encourage in others.

### **New Honesty and Openness**

The last time I was angry with the kids, instead of taking a walk alone, I invited the family to come with me to talk about the problem together. I should say that this kind of openness has coincided with a new honesty from me about my own sins. The self-counseling project drove me to spend more time in prayer than usual. As I prayed, God kept convicting me of my pride and wrong motives. I asked God for forgiveness and later confessed what I had learned to my wife. I also told the girls what God had been teaching me about myself.

Our family prayer time is getting more meaningful and rich. In fact, we don't dare skip it because the girls refuse to go to bed! They keep reminding us, sometimes singing out, "We haven't prayed yet...!" There is more openness, and we are all learning to confess our sins before each other. The children will ask forgiveness for things we didn't even know they did! God is becoming a present reality to the girls. When they pray, they sound as if they are talking to someone they really know.

The benefits have extended beyond my family too. My own fellowship with God has deepened, and it seems that people can see the change in our family. People in church have told us how happy we look; our lives are part of our testimony, not just our words. We have more opportunities to minister outside our family; and as we do, I sense within myself a greater sincerity, openness, and depth in my service.

### **What Made the Difference?**

What has made the difference? God made significant inroads into my anger as I trusted more fully in the work of the Holy Spirit for my sanctification. That work is progressive; and as I reflect on the changes I have seen, I know that I will have victory one day as I "grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

That has gone hand in hand with a better understanding of anger from God's point of view. I take it more seriously now, as something that is selfish, uncontrolled, sinful, and hurtful to others. It must be banished from my life as a Christian because I cannot have a good relationship with anyone, including God, when I am angry; and I certainly cannot serve Him effectively. I have come to see that my anger rarely had anything to do with righteous indignation; it was just an expression of personal annoyance and wounded pride. My pride and hurt feelings were idols in my life. I had to confess them to God and repent.

My view of trials and suffering has also changed. When troubles come, I am learning to remember that God is in them rather than just blaming someone else for them. As I reflect on Romans 8:28-30, I realize that the difficulties I've detailed in this study were for my good so that the wrong motives of my own heart could be revealed. As I faced these idols, God helped me to turn from them in humility and repentance so that He could make me more of what He wants me to be.

I am learning that God works through people and circumstances to accomplish His plan and purpose in our lives. This is leading me to a deeper trust in God, that His grace is sufficient for any circumstance of life (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As the two incidents revealed not only my anger but my attitudes toward material things, God has been teaching me that He will provide for our every need (Philippians 4:19). My prayer life has deepened as has my thanksgiving that God works all things for my good and His glory.

This had led to new patterns in my life even when I do get angry. I no longer lose my appetite and ability to concentrate when something goes wrong. That long period of silence is also receding, and I am going to God in prayer more quickly instead of reacting in the flesh.

I have come to a deeper appreciation and thankfulness for the Old Testament description of God as “slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.” I must think before I do or say anything when I am angry. It humbles me and yet also provides the foundation on which I can seek to be more patient, loving, and forgiving of others.

### **Present Struggles**

I still have an ongoing problem with anger. My instant first reaction is still sinful. I still make harsh and hasty remarks, though they are fewer and more quickly renounced. My main focus now is to deal with the reality that I must think before I do or say anything when I am angry. I am praying and meditating on five key verses:

Proverbs 10:19: “In the multitude of words, sin is unavoidable. But he who restrains his lips is wise.”

Proverbs 15:28: “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”

Proverbs 17:27: “He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.”

James 1:19: “Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

Ephesians 4:26: “Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

My prayer is that these verses will be true of me as I open myself to the Spirit of God and seek to obey Him. I have seen real growth in this area, for which I am so thankful. I have caught myself smiling at things that ordinarily would have annoyed me. The fact that I can sit and talk about problems with my family without exchanging bitter words is amazing!

The process has been a spiritual growth experience that has allowed me to look at myself and allow the Spirit to work in and through me. Most of all, it has given me an opportunity to take a closer look at God’s grace and to lean on Him for more of it.

# HOW TO DEAL WITH YOUR ANGER

Dr. Henry Brandt

Anger is a universal problem. I have observed it in the primitive cannibals in Irian Jaya, uncivilized Indians in the remote jungles of Brazil, illiterate people in tiny villages deep in the forest of Zaire, my playmates when I was a child, in my parents, church members, pastors, highly educated people, the very rich, people in government, and yes, even in myself. Call it what you will: mad, angry, frustrated, annoyed, perturbed, ticked off – all of these words represent a form of anger.

You cannot decide to be angry. You can take elaborate precautions to avoid being angry. But, alas, sooner or later anger underneath your skin is triggered by a memory, someone's behavior, a conversation, a phone call, or a letter. It can cause your heart to beat faster, make you sweat, tense up your muscles, foul up your digestive system, alter the way you think, dictate how you act, and trigger negative words from your mouth.

There seems to be universal agreement that anger must be tamed. Yet there is vast disagreement over the cause and the cure.

I have been aware of anger within me as far back as I can remember. Usually I could ignore it, express it safely to those people like my parents, swallow it, or work it off in various activities like tennis or basketball.

The first time that I was conscious that I could not manage my anger occurred in my late twenties. At that time, I had a boss who kept me riled up most of the day, a wife who persisted in frustrating me by doing things her way rather than my way, and a tiny toddler who irritated me constantly by simply wanting my attention when I didn't want to give it. These three people backed me into a corner. They didn't even know it.

They forced me to face up to the fact that there was something in me that was activated by them and turned me into a person who said things I was sorry for, did things that I regretted, thought things that frightened me, and caused my body (heart, stomach, and muscles) to malfunction.

The solution came for me when I was convinced that I was helpless and needed to be saved from myself. The Bible described my condition exactly: "Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (Romans 7:20).

This sentence sums up what almost everyone says when they come to counseling with an anger problem: "My anger is a normal and justifiable response to the way I was treated."

No one inquires about the possibility of anger being a sin in their hearts. That word has almost disappeared from their vocabulary. These people seek relief from restlessness, nervousness, anxiety. Their buzzwords are "stressed out" or "burned out." They are disturbed about their relationships to with their spouses, children, other family members, social contacts, and people at work or church. People admit anger reluctantly. If they do admit it, they are quick to justify it.

Individuals do come to seek advice when they are the recipient of someone else's anger. For example, a wife will talk to me about her husband: "When in a good mood, Ted is a pleasant

person to be around, but if you catch him when he's mad—look out. I can tell his mood by the way he shuts the door. If he nearly breaks the window in slamming it, I brace myself for his first gripe."

And come it will, followed by other complaints. "Why don't you make those kids keep their bicycles out of the driveway?" "Turn off that TV. There's racket enough around here without that thing adding to it!" "Women drivers! They should it be kept off the highways after 3:00 in the afternoon!"

It is my observation that almost everyone resists calling any kind of anger sin. Multitudes of people (including me) have faced up to problems such as drinking, swearing, or stealing as sin and now it's behind us. It's been dealt with.

Dealing with anger is different. You can be completely and totally repentant over your anger. Confession leads to welcome relief from tension. I suspect that most people experience some anger every week. You think you have dealt with it, and it shows up again.

I have observed that one difficulty in dealing with anger is the wide range of intensity with which it can be expressed. On the one end there is such extreme anger that it leads to violent physical abuse or even murder. We have no difficulty recognizing such anger as sin. But on the other end of the continuum is anger that is so mild as to be almost unnoticeable. This "annoyance level" of anger is easy to ignore; for example, mild frustration at a child who won't make his bed, at a nearly empty gas tank in the car, at a traffic light, or at an impolite clerk.

You can compare anger to the flow of contaminated water into a tub. A wide-open faucet yields the same kind of water as a dripping faucet. One drop at a time will gradually fill a tub if the drain hole is plugged. It may take weeks to fill the tub with contaminated water, but eventually there will come a time when one more drop will make the water spill over the top. All that water came from the same polluted source.

Extreme anger is easy to recognize and impossible to ignore. The body pumps adrenaline into the bloodstream, causing the heartbeat to accelerate, the blood pressure to rise, the mouth to become dry, the muscles to become tense, the mental faculties to become alert, and the emotions to become disturbed.

A drop of anger is not as easy to recognize. To put it another way, it is easy to ignore. Bodily changes are hardly noticeable, but the effects are cumulative. The symptoms are anxiety, restlessness, tension. Drops of anger build up in the body. Eventually, one more incident (major or minor), and anger spills over the top. I listen to people who are puzzled over certain responses that surprise themselves:

"I heard myself screaming at the children to come into the house."

"I was so mad I actually hit her. It was over which tie I should wear."

"He lives a thousand miles away. At times when someone mentions his name I am fully consumed with anger in a matter of seconds."

What Biblical advice is there about the management of anger? Take a look:

For the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:20)

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. (Ephesians 4:31)

It seems clear to me that the Bible is telling us that God expects us to tackle the problems around us with His love in our hearts.

Read on:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. (Matthew 5:44)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. (Ephesians 5:25)

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter 2:17)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? For! am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 38, and 39)

The difficulty seems to be: How can a human being, who naturally responds angrily to the circumstances of life, change from responding in anger to responding in love? Humanly speaking, we must admit that this Biblical advice is impossible to attain.

We all know that to bottle up or swallow our anger is not the solution. Bottled-up anger can ruin your health and twist your thinking. When we suppress our anger, it often simply flows out of us upon one more provocation – often in an explosive way.

The Bible offers a radical solution. The solution to our anger is humanly impossible. We need supernatural help. We must go to God!

### **Step 1: Recognize Anger as Sin**

The Biblical prescription for dealing with destructive anger is precise and strong. Strife, malice, hatred, outbursts of wrath, dissension, contention, and the like are works of the flesh—of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19-21, Colossians 3-8). They are sin, and that’s good news because there is a divine solution for sin. God promised to help you. Dealing with sin is His specialty. Acts 4:12 says, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

A simple step that gives you a source of strength to “stop” angry responses is to invite Jesus to come into your life.

Yet many competent, able people have a hard time accepting the fact that we need supernatural help. “I can manage my anger. Isn’t that good enough?” It certainly beats

exploding. But the best you can do is to manage your anger. Only God can help you to “stop” because anger is sin. Therefore, you need a Savior who will cleanse you of your sins.

It is not inevitable that we must spend the rest of our lives struggling with anger. It can be “put away.” Once we accept the fact that anger is sin and we need a Savior, we can practice a simple Biblical directive—daily, if necessary: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Anger is sin. It is destructive. God will cleanse the anger out of our hearts.

## **Step 2: Replace Anger with the Fruit of the Spirit**

When you have a forgiven, cleansed heart, you can ask God for the power of the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life as described in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

You will still have problems, face injustices, and encounter difficult people—as everyone does. You will still need to be energized, alerted, and motivated to correct what needs correcting. But a Christian knows that a person energized by the Holy Spirit with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control has the strength to conquer the bitter, sarcastic words; anxiety; bodily tensions; and violent behavior that formerly characterized him.

A Christian does not always surrender to God perfectly any more than he can manage himself perfectly. Few people make it through any given day perfectly. But with God’s help, you can catch anger at the earliest possible point.

An elated, middle-aged gentleman told me this story:

Mike had made a poor decision that cost his company thousands of dollars. His boss called him and severely berated him over the phone. A contrite man hung up the phone and it rang again. It was his boss’s boss, who proceeded to berate him also.

Mike felt himself becoming angry. Without interrupting the conversation, he repented and prayed for a peaceful heart. Before the conversation ended, he was fully relaxed.

When you realize you have sinned, take it to God. Our response to people and circumstances on the outside of us constantly reminds us of the condition inside us: an imperfect spiritual life which seems easier to justify or deny than to face.

We have the need for daily renewal of our dependency upon God. No one is exempt. There is none righteous. There is no human remedy. Daily dependence on God for help does not gradually change to self-sufficient independence. You should deal with anger as sin just as soon as you are aware of it, regardless of how mild your response is. Confession and repentance pull the plug and cleanse the heart of any anger lurking there. Do it as often as necessary.

2 Corinthians 9:8 shares these wonderful words: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work”.

And that is the good news for everyone who is filled with anger and malice and bitterness. The people in your life may never change their ways. Circumstances may be beyond your control.

But fortunately you can do something about yourself. You can open your heart to God, who is able to fill it with bountiful grace. But whether you allow God to give you His grace is your decision.

Strangely, most people who seek counsel will argue that they have the right to be angry. “Under my circumstances, can you blame me?” they will say in stout defense. Of course they have the right to be angry; but as long as they argue in defense of their wrath, they will see no need nor have any desire to change and thus be delivered from the unhappiness of anger.

One of the most-quoted verses in the Bible is Ephesians 4:26: “Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.”

My clients uniformly declare that this verse means that their kind of anger is not sin. That may be true ... but I don’t think so. There is a part of that verse that is not debatable. Call your anger righteous if you will; this verse says to get rid of it by sundown.

How do we experience anger and not sin? The same way Jesus experienced anger—if we are walking in union with Him and in the Holy Spirit—by not allowing the sun to go down on the anger nor allowing the devil a foothold. Once we allow anger to become a motivating factor in our lives, the warning in James 1:20 applies: “for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

There is no human remedy. Only God can cleanse your heart. God commands us to walk in His Spirit. We are ordered to love evil people

A certain couple came to visit me. The lady sat there seething with animosity toward her husband. She had just learned that he had been unfaithful to her throughout their 30-year marriage. There were dozens of other women involved. Her husband sat there looking very contrite. He had a long history of deception, hypocrisy, and satisfying his lusts.

He claimed to be genuinely repentant. No one would believe him. They said he was only sorry he got caught. He said his wife, who was normally a pleasant person, had become an angry, hateful, unresponsive person. She said it was his fault. He didn’t know what more he could do. He wanted to know if I believed him.

My answer? “God loves both of you enough to have sacrificed His Son for your sins and to give you access to the fruit of the Spirit. I love both of you, too, but I have no way of knowing the condition of your hearts.”

The good news is that her husband’s behavior could not come between her and God. She could call on God at any time and exchange her animosity for love, joy, peace, and kindness. All were available for the asking. Of course, she would still need to deal with her marital problem—even after a change of heart.

Her husband had the same access to God. He could exchange his sins for the fruit of the Spirit.

I have seen others sitting in the same chairs:

- A woman unfaithful to her husband
- A man who beat his wife’s face into a swollen black and blue mess

- A couple who swindled some widows of tens of thousands of dollars
- A teenage thief who is on drugs or alcohol
- A man tormented by the memory of raping and killing a woman
- A woman who walked away from her husband and children
- A teacher who sexually abused some students
- A couple who disagreed over money, social life, or how to manage children

I can go on and on. The range of human behavior because of sinful hearts seems endless. I suppose the most serious are couples and parents who neglect each other and their children.

God loves them all; none of these people deserve it. They are all sinners—just a prayer away from a new start.

Unrepentant, intelligent people believe that they can justify their anger because God gets angry. This is why they comb the Gospels for any shred of evidence that Jesus got angry. The term “righteous indignation” just blurs the issue. Perhaps ninety-five percent of anyone’s anger is plain, old-fashioned sin and we all know it. Anger plagues everyone. We should simply face it and take Jesus up on His offer: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).