



## Anger

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Nobody really likes anger, but the fact is that we all experience it. We all get angry and we've all experienced being the brunt of someone else's anger. In his book *Uprooting Anger* – which I highly recommend – Robert Jones writes this, “Anger is a universal problem, prevalent in every culture, experienced by every generation. No one is isolated from its presence or immune from its poison. It permeates each person and spoils our most intimate relationships. Anger is a given part of our fallen human fabric.” What he adds is very true, when he writes, “Sadly, this is true even in our Christian homes and churches.”

Jones is right. The most blatant displays of anger tend to be aimed not at the people we work with or interact with on a daily basis in the world, but at the people we love the most: at our husbands, wives, children, parents, brothers and sisters – and not just our biological brothers and sisters, but our brothers and sisters in Christ too.

I remember the pastor of one of the churches I attended as a kid talking about anger. He said that when he was a young kid, about ten years old, his dad came home with a big surprise. He'd been given a raise that day at work, and so to celebrate, he'd gone by the Chevy dealership on the way home and traded in the old family car on a brand-new 1955 Chevy. He said that when his dad got home you could see just how happy, excited, and proud he was as he pulled into the driveway in that new car and shouted to the family to come and take a look. Our pastor said he'd been riding his bike and was excited too. He rode into the driveway on his bike, jumped off it, and ran to give his dad a big hug, but before he got to his dad, all the excitement came to a sudden end as the look on his dad's face changed. He turned to see what his dad was looking at and saw, almost in slow motion, his bike tip over. The handlebar hit the side of the new car and as it fell to the ground the end of the handlebar made

a loud screech as it scraped a two-foot long scratch in the side of the car. In an instant his dad's joy turned into anger as he flew into an angry rage and berated him, going on for fifteen minutes about his carelessness – anger totally out of proportion to the infraction. Our pastor said that his dad usually kept his cars for a long time, but they only kept that car for a couple of years and he said that its sale was the happiest moment his family had with that car.

I think everyone here has had a moment like that at some point in life – you've either been on the giving or receiving end of it. We're often hardest on our kids, as in that story. Think about how we parents often respond in ways that are out of proportion to what our kids do. Little pre-schooler Susie is playing outside while Mom's mopping the floor. She picks some flower and excitedly runs inside to give them to her Mom and doesn't realise that she's tracking mud all over the clean floor, and Mom blows up at her. It's totally out of proportion to the infraction. (And, as an aside, if you couple that with the fact that Susie sometimes does things that are really deserving of serious discipline and Mom choose to ignore them, it's no wonder when our kids grow up to be disobedient and flaunt authority.)

So what is anger? I think a lot of us would say, “I can't really define it in words, but I sure know when I see it, especially if it's directed towards me!” Well, obviously at its most basic, it's an emotion – a strong feeling of displeasure with something or someone. In that sense, like all emotion, it's God-given. God has designed us to experience anger – it gives us energy and then that energy can be directed at solving the problem that's caused the anger in the first place. Our problem is that we may experience anger over things we have no business being angry over – or, maybe more commonly, we take the energy that anger gives and direct it at something other than the real problem or we use it in ways that make the problem worse instead of better. Remember that St. Paul tells us in Ephesians, “Be angry, but sin not.”

Anger's a big and complicated issue and it's not really something we can deal with in one sermon. So since this series of sermons is about helping us to confront the sins we tolerate in our lives, I want to focus tonight on the aspect of anger that

we're prone to treating as an “acceptable” sin.

Now to do that I think we need to be clear about righteous anger. Some people will justify their anger as being “righteous.” They think they have a right to be angry about a given situation. So how do you know if your anger is righteous or not? Well, let me remind you of what I said before: anger is a God-given emotion. And so, if our anger arises from an accurate perception of true evil – if it's provoked by a violation of God's moral Law or if we see God's Truth being profaned – our anger is probably righteous. *Righteous anger is focused on God and on his will, not on me or my will.* That said, righteous anger is also always self-controlled. Righteous anger doesn't result in the loss of one's temper and it doesn't provoke us take revenge or retaliate in some kind of vengeful way.

The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about righteous anger. The really great example we have is that of Christ driving the money-changers out of the Temple. There are a few other similar examples, but Scripture mostly focuses on sinful anger – on the way in which we're prone to misuse the God-given emotion and the ways we tend to misdirect the energy it gives us. Sometimes we may be reacting to the real sin of another person, but if we're more concerned with the negative impact of that sin on us than we are that it's a violation of God's Law, then our anger is sinful.

It's completely just and righteous for us to be angry and outraged when we see leaders in the Church teaching false doctrine and undermining the Gospel itself. In situations like that our anger ought to motivate us to stand up for the truth. The problem is that in the current crisis in the Church a lot of people, instead of taking a stand for truth, are attacking those teaching bad doctrine and attacking them in ways that are clearly sinful. That doesn't solve the problem. If our goal is to bring those people to faith and repentance, calling them names and making threats isn't going to get us to that goal – it's only going to make the problem worse.

When we become sinfully angry we need to realise that the cause is in us – not in another person or in the situation. You might get angry because someone mistreated you. Maybe they gossiped or

told lies about you and when you heard about it you got angry. More often than not the anger isn't the result of that person having sinned, it's the result of them having *sinned against you*. You're angry because your pride was hurt.

Maybe you get angry when you don't get your way. We see this in our kids on a regular basis, but it's just as true of us adults. Some of us have stronger personalities than others. Sometimes we can angrily clash with each other. Other times the stronger tend run roughshod over the weaker. When someone in our family doesn't get his or her way, they tend to become angry. The same thing can happen in the Church too. But ultimately the cause of the anger is selfishness – "I want it *my way!*"

Often our anger is a response to someone else's. A husband comes home from a long and tiring day at work expecting a clean house and kids and dinner on the table, and when the house and kids are dirty and dinner isn't even on the stove he loses his cool and says something hurtful. Then the wife gets angry in response and says something nasty back – or maybe instead of blowing up in return, she internalises her anger and seethes on the inside. Her anger is just as sinful as her husband's. Maybe your boss chews you out at work. I used to have a boss like that: yell, scream, and swear first; ask questions later. Retaliating in kind will usually get you fired, so like the wife in my last example, you stuff it and seethe with resentment.

We can choose how we deal with anger, whether it's a husband, a wife, a boss, or an employee. Consider St. Peter's words to slaves in the apostolic Church. They often served under harsh and cruel masters and by our modern thinking would have been justified in fighting back, but that's not what Peter tells them to do. He writes,

**Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. (1 Peter 2:18-20)**

None of us is a slave, but the broader Scriptural principle applies to all of us: We are to respond to any unjust treatment as "mindful of God." What does that mean? To be mindful of God means to think of God's will and God's glory. You need to ask yourself how God would react in your situation? Ask yourself how God is best glorified by your response. God is sovereign over all things, but we tend to forget that and live as if he's not in control. We need to remember that in all things he is in control and that in his infinite wisdom and goodness he's using the hard things in our lives to conform us more and more to the image of Christ.

In the heat of the moment it's not always easy to remember these things: that God's in control, that he's working for our good and his glory. If we forget and act out sinfully, when the heat dies down, we quickly need to acknowledge the sin, confess it to God and to the person we've wronged and ask for their forgiveness. But better yet, memorise Scriptures like Romans 8:28, that teach us that God works all things for the good of those whom he loves and are called according to his purpose. The more you dwell on God's truths, the more you'll come to live by them – the more they'll become a part of what motivates you and drives your responses.

It helps to memorise Scriptures that remind us how we're supposed to act in the first place. Think of Ephesians 4:32:

**Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.**

Or Colossians 3:13

**...bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.**

But more importantly, we need to hand over to God the occasion of our anger. This is even more true when we find ourselves the object of someone else's anger or when we're treated unjustly by a boss or an overbearing spouse – or anyone who treats us unfairly. To dissolve our sinful responses we need to acknowledge that God is sovereign in every aspect of our lives (not just what we perceive as the

"good," but also what we perceive as the "bad") and that all the words and actions of other people that tempt us to anger are somehow included in God's wise and good purposes to make us more like Christ. We need to remember that any situation that tempts us to sinful anger can either drive us to sinful anger of our own or to Christ and his sanctifying power.

There's another aspect of anger that I think it's important to touch on while we're on the subject of anger and that's *anger towards God*. As a minister this is something I've heard an awful lot of people talk about – they're mad at God. They think that somehow God has let them down. Some say they think that God is against them – that he's out to get them. Some people beat around the bush to express their anger at God, but I've talked to some people who are happy to say it outright: I'm angry with God – even, I *hate* God because of the bad things in my life.

What do you say to someone like that? What do you do if that's how *you're* feeling toward God? Is it okay to be angry towards God? I've heard a lot of modern psychologists say that it's okay. I've even heard pastors and popular Christian writers say that it's okay. A pastor I once knew told my friend, "It's okay to be angry at God. He's God. He's a big guy. He can take it." And quite frankly I'll tell you, that's blasphemy.

I can't say this loudly and clearly enough: It is *never* okay to be angry with God. When we get angry with God, we're making a moral judgement that says, "God has done me wrong." Think that statement through. If you're accusing God of having wronged you, what your really accusing God of is sinning against you. You're saying that God hasn't treated you fairly or that he hasn't give you a fair shake – that he should be treating you better than he is or that he owes you something. You're putting God in the defendant's seat and acting as judge over him.

Jerry Bridges writes about a man who, as his mother was dying of cancer said, "After all she's done for God, this is the thanks she gets." Okay, so never mind the untold suffering and agony that Jesus Christ experienced to pay for her sins so that she wouldn't have to spend an

eternity in hell. This man thought that on top of sending his own Son to die for his mother's eternal salvation, he also owed her a better life on this earth.

We're probably all prone to momentary feelings of anger toward God, but when that happens we need to be quick to recognise it for the sin it is and repent right then and there.

But how do you deal with the temptation to be angry with God? We might be prone to "stuffing it" just as we "stuff" our feelings of anger toward other people, but if we do that then our fellowship with God is going to suffer. Stuffing it is no better than blowing up – both are sinful ways of dealing with anger – and in this case anger with God, which is *never* justified. The biblical answer lies in a well-grounded trust in the sovereignty, wisdom, and love of God. Instead of getting angry with God, we need to bring our confusion and perplexity to him in a humble and trusting way. We can pray something like this:

"Father, I know that you love me. I know that your ways are often above and beyond my understanding. I come to you now admitting my own confusion, because I am unable to see the evidence of your love towards me. Open my eyes, Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit and show me the way to put my trust in you instead of giving in to the temptation to become angry with you."

Remember that our God is a forgiving God. Jesus didn't die for some sins and not for others. God will forgive our anger against him just as he forgives our other sins when we repent of them. Jesus' death on the cross has already paid for it all. So if you have anger in your heart, I urge you to come to God in repentance and experience the cleansing power of Christ's blood, which was shed for you.

A lot of Christians live in denial of their anger. They knowingly experience flare-ups and blow-ups in their thoughts and emotions towards others who somehow displease them, but they don't identify it as anger, and especially not as sinful anger. Instead of looking at themselves, they focus on the other person as the cause and justify their own reaction. They don't see their sin. As a result their anger has become an "acceptable" sin. If this is you, you need to deal with it. And for all of us,

whether our anger is frequent or only flares up every once in while, we need to recognise it as the sin that it is and take appropriate action to put an end to it.

Please pray with me: Father, we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We acknowledge that our emotions – even the angry ones – are part of your design. We confess that all too often we misuse and misapply the gifts you have given in sinful ways. Give us your grace and show us how to put your gifts to Godly use. We ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.