
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.¹

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."² 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.³

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."⁴

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."⁵ 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

¹John 3:36; cf. 3:14-21.

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

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

⁴Ezekiel 18:29 and 24:14.

⁵Jeremiah 16:12; Judges 21:25.

world's misery: and it was out of these two emotions that His actual mercy proceeded."⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ God's anger

⁸Hebrews 12:5-11.

⁹Revelation 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.

¹⁰This 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

⁶Warfield, p. 122.

⁷A 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.

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ "If God is for

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.

¹¹This 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....

¹²Romans 12:19.

¹³We 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Sinful anger

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.

¹⁴Revelation 12:12; John 8:44.

¹⁵Like "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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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

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).

¹⁶Compare Exodus 32:19 with 32:11.

¹⁷Numbers 20:7-13.

from God, frequently comments on anger: the wise and foolish are distinguishable by how they get angry.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

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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.²⁰ 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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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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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.²¹ 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-

²¹C. 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.

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

Anger rarely stands alone.

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

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.²² Obviously, anger is a central feature of interpersonal conflicts wherever they occur: marriages, families, churches, workplaces, neighborhoods, nations. It is an interper-

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

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

²²Of 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

*Anger evaluates and
anger is itself evaluated.*

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.²³

²³When 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.²⁴ 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

²⁴Woody 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.

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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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

²⁵“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.

²⁶Many 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.

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!²⁷

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'

²⁷A 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.

parable about “the log and the speck” turns on this issue.²⁸ 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!²⁹ 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-

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

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

²⁸Matthew 7:1-5 and Luke 6:39-45.

²⁹This 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."³⁰ 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.³¹ 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

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

³¹Some 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.

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).

The sinfulness or godliness of anger arises from the motive.

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.”³² 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

³²Matthew 18:22 and Luke 17:4.

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.