

THE BIBLICAL  
COUNSELING  
GUIDE FOR  
*W*OMEN

John D. Street & Janie Street



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS  
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The characters in each chapter are fictitious yet represent a composite of many actual counselees. The story lines are not written to present the account of any one particular person. If some of the details of a chapter remind you of a situation with which you are familiar, this is purely coincidental.

Because the counseling scenarios in this book are composites, the actual specifics you find necessary for addressing individual counselees may vary depending on the factors involved in their cases.

## THE BIBLICAL COUNSELING GUIDE FOR WOMEN

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## Foreword

Have you ever had a problem you could not solve? Or a friend whom you could not help? In this book, John and Janie Street have made it abundantly clear that there is great hope no matter the kinds of problems women struggle with. They have laid out clear, biblical plans of action for issues that women face today. And through compelling stories, they have shown how women can help women to respond so that by the grace of God and obedience to His Word, they can help others to turn from the misery they find themselves in.

God's Word *is* "living and active" and sufficient to help us "in times of need" (Hebrews 4:12, 16). He has, in fact, "granted to us all things pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). There is no need to embrace man-made ideas about what will help someone stuck in the midst of difficult emotional problems. Our Lord Jesus expressed it this way when He prayed to the Father in John 17: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

This book points you to God's truth. It is full of hope and practical biblical guidance. My prayer is that God will use this book to bless those who read it for themselves or to help others.

To God alone be the glory.

Martha Peace  
Biblical counselor and author  
of *The Excellent Wife*



## Seeking God’s Wisdom for Real Hope and Change

A woman was the crowning point of God’s original creation. In the first chapter of Genesis, at the end of each day of creation, God characterized what He had made as “good,” but not until He created the woman did He pronounce “everything that he made” to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Our great God who made woman is also her Helper. This book is written to assist Christian women who possess a high view of the sufficiency of God’s Word and its ability to adequately address the most serious personal struggles women will face. Women who trust His Word will benefit greatly from its narrative. You will need a Bible close at hand as you read each chapter, because this book is full of carefully selected Scripture references that should be consulted as you read.

Women have been sufferers ever since the entrance of sin into the human condition. Some of the chapters in this book are written for the woman who is suffering because she lives in this sin-cursed world. Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), everyone around her is a sinner and she will often be sinned against. The Bible speaks to those who suffer, and its truth is especially powerful for those who suffer unjustly. Study Psalms 55, 56,

and 57, and you will find help if you suffer from betrayal. Examine Psalms 37 and 73 if you struggle while watching the wicked prosper. Consider Hebrews 2:14-18 and 4:15-16 for a look at your Savior, who suffered unjustly in order to sympathize with your plight. How should a woman respond to unjust suffering? This book provides help!

This book is also about a woman's suffering as a result of her own sin (Romans 3:23). Scripture is clear that a woman's ungodly attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors will have consequences. Life will be difficult and adversity will dog her steps when a woman walks foolishly (Proverbs 13:15, 21). There are chapters in this book that are written to help women with this type of suffering as well. It will be particularly helpful to the woman who has lost hope of ever changing. The practical value of biblical counsel is unmatched.

In the Bible, God is revealed as creator of the world, sustainer of His creation, and gracious redeemer of His people. As the King above all earthy kings, He is absolutely sovereign in all the affairs of life (Romans 9:15-23; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 4:11). God has chosen to reveal some of His purposes and plans in the Bible, but He has also sovereignly chosen to keep secret many of the things He is doing and intends to bring to pass for our good and His glory (Deuteronomy 29:29). You can be sure that whatever happens is the outworking of God's perfect blueprint for your life; and because He is a holy, good, just, and wise God, you can trust Him. Ecclesiastes 7:14 declares, "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." In other words, God expects you to trust Him by following what He has revealed to you in His Word and not expect to be told all of His reasons behind every providential detail of your life. This book is all about learning the rich insights that God's Word has for your life, and then



understanding how to trust it enough to live by it— regardless of the details or difficulty of your circumstances.

Because the Bible is the very Word of God, it stands uniquely alone in its precision and comprehensiveness. Having originated with God, it is inerrant (without error) and sufficient (2 Peter 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Both inerrancy and sufficiency are established upon the very nature and character of God; being absolutely perfect in His divine nature, His written revelation, the Bible, is absolute perfection (2 Samuel 22:31; Psalm 19:7). There is nothing unrevealed that is important or necessary for the welfare of the souls of His people. Furthermore, because your Bible preserves the very words of the King, it is absolutely authoritative. This authority surpasses and exceeds any and all theory or counsel that mere man can construct for dealing with the turmoil or difficulties of the soul (Proverbs 30:5). Not only does it possess remedies for the cure of the soul, it also possesses the diagnostic criteria. With inerrancy, sufficiency, and authority as its foundation, this book takes several contemporary problems that women face and shows how thoroughly and practically the Word of God speaks to each issue.

This book is based on real-life case studies of women who have faced formidable personal struggles and hardship, but have learned how to face them with competent biblical counsel. Although the characters in each chapter are fictitious, they represent a composite of many counselees that we have encountered in more than 35 years of biblical counseling—both through the hours we have spent in counseling and a vast amount of time supervising counselors-in-training as they opened their Bibles to counsel others. The story lines are not written to present the account of any one particular person. If some of the details of a chapter remind you of a situation with which you are familiar, this is purely coincidental.

However, the fact that these chapters draw upon actual counseling

situations should enable you to see their practicality and usefulness in handling even the most severe mental, emotional, and spiritual problems. This book is written for the purpose of providing insightful practical answers from Scripture, and is not intended to be a scholastic review of various theoretical approaches to a particular problem, even though the authors are aware of such views. There are solid academic theses and manuscripts that support the counsel in each chapter, but it is not the purpose of this book to review such research. The chapters within address various problems of the soul. They are not comprehensive guides to each problem; instead, they are intended to address the most common features that each difficulty of the soul presents and point the reader to biblical help in finding practical and authoritative answers to their problems.

It is vital to the biblical counseling process for the reader/counselee to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. She must fully trust the Lord and His revealed will for this book to be of any substantial benefit. For the unbeliever, at best, the Bible is a set of suggestions. For the believer, it is her final authority for faith and practice. Biblical counseling is effective when the counselee is a Christian and fully trusts the inspiration of the 66 canonical books of the Bible. Change can be difficult for believers, but real change that God counts as righteousness is impossible for an unbeliever. That is because biblical change occurs at the heart level and is not merely behavioral or external. Only Christians, with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, can experience true change in the heart. For a clear explanation of saving faith in Jesus Christ, see Appendix A.

What is the goal of biblical counseling? In short, it is to help a counselee live a life of obedience and faith, and thus to be more Christlike (John 6:35-40). This is accomplished by living out the implications of the gospel in the midst of your problems, seeking to bring all of your life under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ

and His Word. The goal is not simply a short-sighted attempt to get a woman out of her problems, even though, when a person follows Christ's admonitions, her problems will often eventually be resolved.

However, some problems will not go away, even after you have faithfully obeyed Christ. Some of life's difficulties may even get worse (see, for example, Genesis 39:7-20). Consider the practical example of a Christian wife living out her Christianity in front of her unbelieving husband, which only serves to make him angrier (1 Peter 3:1-6). Regardless of his growing anger she remains faithful to Christ; the Lord uses her faithfulness to build her endurance, which, in turn, strengthens her godly character, thereby deepening her hope (Romans 5:3-5). The difficulty with her husband does not go away, but she is able to produce righteous fruit in the midst of her storm (Psalm 1; James 1:2-4). How can you, as a godly woman, learn to please God in the midst of your problems? This must be the pursuit of a woman who is a committed Christian (2 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 1:9-10).

It is our hope that as you read and reflect on the topics and discussion questions at the end of each chapter that your love for the Lord and His Word will increase. It will be vital that, as you use your Bible and look up the textual references in each chapter, you not take verses out of context, unwittingly distorting their intended meaning. Read the surrounding context of the verse to ensure you are reading and understanding it properly. As you read, ask yourself: What did the original author of those words intend for them to mean to the original audience? Great care has been taken to place these counseling narratives into helpful biblical texts that either directly or indirectly match the original intent of the biblical author, but you will need to do careful studies of Scripture passages in order to properly understand them. Often the biblical reference provided will illustrate a theological truth referred to in the content of the story.

Remember, God's Word is your final authority, but the reference verse you are looking up must be understood within the context of the broader passage of Scripture from which it has been taken.

May the truths of Scripture bring lasting change and growth in your life as you seek practical answers for the problems you face—to the honor and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

John and Janie Street

December 2016

## Anger

*Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,  
for anger lodges in the heart of fools.*

ECCLESIASTES 7:9

“Stop asking me stupid questions. Can’t you see I’m trying to get dinner ready before soccer practice? You’re going to make us late again!” Melinda heard her own voice raised once again in angry impatience with her children. She cringed inwardly as she recalled multiple times that she had responded similarly within the past week. An ugly, habitual pattern of angry outbursts was becoming obvious to her.

Like many busy moms, Melinda tries hard to remain calm and controlled in the face of mountains of laundry, tight schedules, and fatigue from insufficient sleep. But lately she senses a new intensity to her anger—which frightens her. After such a display of anger, she is overcome with remorse. This is not the way a godly woman should respond to her family. She realizes things must change, and yet, after months of wishing and praying for that change, she seems even further mired in her ungodly ways.

Her mind keeps running over and over again the disturbing words of Proverbs 14:1: “The wisest of women builds her house, but

folly with her own hands tears it down.” Would her next eruption be in public, perhaps ruining her husband’s reputation at a company dinner? In a careless moment, will she explode and destroy a close friendship? During an angry outburst, might she wreck the car and cause bodily harm to some stranger? Or even worse, would she do something stupid and hurt her own children? She knows this is not the way a Christian is supposed to live. What is going on in her angry heart? Her ability to remain composed and self-controlled seems to slip away as her passion increases.

Frequently upset and frustrated, Melinda is beginning to think that perhaps she has a hormonal problem. This is just not like her—allowing little things to irritate her and losing her temper so quickly. Some of her friends had similar experiences and were diagnosed with physiological problems—hormonal imbalances and tumors. Maybe a simple hormonal treatment or vitamin supplements would be the answer. Or might she require a surgical procedure?

Resigning herself to these possibilities, Melinda went to see her doctor. But after several medical tests, all her reports were negative. “There is nothing physically wrong with you,” her physician explained. “However, there are other explanations for what you are experiencing.” He proceeded to describe how anger can be a symptom of recurring psychological problems, like attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), paranoid personality disorder (paranoia), antisocial personality disorder (sociopathy), borderline personality disorder, or narcissism.

Melinda’s mind raced, *Could this be true? Do I have some deeply embedded psychological problem that is the source of my anger? Do I need to see a psychologist or psychiatrist? Am I mentally disturbed and not recognizing it?* She had heard of some people who spent many years in psychotherapy sessions, paying thousands of dollars that

ultimately depleted their insurance coverage, and yet their problems were never resolved. Was this in her future?

One day a close Christian friend suggested Melinda consider seeing a well-trained biblical counselor about her anger. “Biblical answers are always the best answers,” her friend remarked with confidence. After thinking about this for a while, Melinda decided she really didn’t need to talk to a counselor. She was quite sure that she didn’t have a psychological disorder, as the doctor had suggested. And besides, her anger problems were normal, something every wife and mother goes through. She decided instead to memorize a few verses from the Bible and try to keep calm. “Keep calm and carry on—isn’t that what everyone says these days?” James 1:19-20 seemed just right for her: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Feeling better already, Melinda read these verses over and over on her iPhone until James and Katherine came running toward the car after soccer practice was over.

For about a week, Melinda was on cloud nine. Several times, she had been tempted to blow up. But she had worked hard on being “slow to speak.” James and Katherine seemed to be bickering less with each other, and they were more responsive to her as well. Even her husband, Doug, noticed a difference. Returning home early from work one day, he remarked at how cooperative the children seemed. He also complimented her, “It’s good to see my beautiful wife looking so happy these days.”

It was the phone call that started it all up again. Melinda’s mother called to say that they were not going to visit at Christmas like they had promised. “It’s your sister’s fault, you know. She has such a hard life being a single mom, and your dad and I are trying to do everything we can to make her life easier. You understand, don’t you, dear?”

I know it's been a long time since we've had Christmas together, but you are the stronger daughter. I'm sure you and your family will have a nice time together. Maybe you can visit Doug's folks again."

At first Melinda was silent. Then she managed to say, "It's okay, Mom. Don't worry. We'll be fine." When the call ended, the raging thoughts began. *Why does my sister have to ruin everything? She's so controlling—always wanting her own way! She wouldn't have such a hard life if she hadn't married such a jerk. She makes all the bad choices and gets all the good stuff—Mom and Dad at the holidays, loads of sympathy, and no accountability. She never says, "I'm sorry." She just keeps taking and taking and taking. Well, I've had it with her!*

Before she could change her mind, Melinda picked up the phone and punched in her sister's cell number—not caring that she would interrupt her at work. When Jenna answered, she was surprised to hear from Melinda, but even more shocked to hear her pent-up anger erupt over the phone. She sat at her desk, stunned and silent, waiting for Melinda to finish her bitter tirade. Phrases like "you always," "you never," "you're so selfish," and "you never think of anyone but yourself" were ringing in her ears as she hung up the phone. Turning back to her computer in an attempt to focus on her work, tears threatened to spill out of her eyes.

Afterward, Melinda felt relieved of the weight of her bitterness, but that sense of relief was quickly replaced with the oh-so-familiar remorse. She had done it again, only this time worse than ever. Those awful things she had said to her sister! Why had she done that? Why hadn't her memory verses kept her from exploding in anger? Now things were much worse than before. Jenna would go crying to their mother, Doug would eventually find out, and Melinda felt full of guilt and shame once again.

Sobbing in distress, Melinda knew that her friend was right. It was time to get some help. Before she could talk herself out of it,



she called the church office and set an appointment with an older woman who was trained to help people with their difficulties.

Melinda had always wanted to be a godly woman, wife, and mother, but she never considered that the Bible would have anything to do with her “emotional” problems. Happily, Melinda found out her assumptions were wrong! She was soon to discover that the Bible indeed had answers for the difficulties she faced, and that learning how God wanted her to handle her sinful anger was about to transform her life.

“Not all anger is sinful. Did you know that?” her counselor asked. Melinda had never heard this before. Her frequent outbursts of anger brought so much guilt and shame that she had never taken the time to look at anger from a biblical viewpoint. Helen, her biblical counselor, continued. “Psalm 7:11 says that God gets angry every day. The phrase ‘every day’ is a Hebrew idiom meaning all the time, or ‘all day, every day.’ In a display of righteous anger, Jesus drove the greedy money-changers out of the courtyard in the Jerusalem temple because zeal for the proper treatment of His Father’s house overwhelmed Him (John 2:14-17). Like God and Jesus Christ, you have the capacity to become angry, which you are well aware of. This is what theologians call one aspect of the communicable attributes of God to His human beings who bear His image.”

Melinda found out that there were two aspects to her capacity for anger: one good and one sinful. Everyone has the potential to become angry when observing an injustice, an act of wanton violence, or cruelty. This is a form of *righteous* anger; it is not sinful anger.

In writing to the Ephesian Christians concerning their interpersonal conduct with one another, the apostle Paul commented, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). In this verse, Paul referenced Psalm 4:4, where the Old Testament word translated “anger” is a clear Hebrew imperative,

while the Greek word used in Ephesians 4:26 can be taken as an indicative (statement of fact) *or* imperative (expressing a command). A good interpretation leads us to the indicative translation: Paul was not commanding Christians to be angry, which would be an imperative; rather, he assumed that there will be times in your life when you would be angry with good reason—an indicative, or a statement of fact. He conceded that anger will be a part of your life as you live in a sin-cursed world.

But then Paul proceeded to warn, presumably because of our sinful nature, that even righteous anger can quickly turn into wicked anger. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Some people have unwisely taken this to mean that Paul was giving permission to hold onto anger until a few minutes before sunset. On the contrary, this is an ancient first-century expression that means you must deal with your anger as quickly as possible. No one should remain angry for a long period of time, because even righteous anger can become unrighteous when left unresolved. Even your most positive human emotions can easily and quickly become tainted because of depravity.

While this information about anger was informative, Melinda wasn’t sure her anger could be called *righteous*. How could it, since it brought such shame upon her? Helen then began to describe the sinful aspect of anger. The Bible calls this *unrighteous* anger. The essential difference between the two is that righteous anger always seeks God’s goals. It always desires what God desires: justice, equity, goodness, and kindness. It is others-centered.

In contrast, unrighteous anger always seeks personal goals and rights. It is self-centered. It is consumed with being denied personal rights and is characterized by demanding attitudes. Unrighteous anger is seldom satisfied and most assuredly never *fully* satisfied. Ecclesiastes 7:9 indicates that anger or vexation resides in the bosom of fools. The unwise person will allow anger to fester and cultivate

in the heart. The angry heart says, “I want what I want;” or “What I do have, I don’t want.” It refuses to be satisfied with anything short of its own selfish ambitions. Melinda began to cringe, as she felt this was describing her type of anger.

Helen illustrated it this way: If you were to observe someone violently abusing a small child, it *should* cause you to become angry. An injustice is being done, as well as a criminal act. God has created you with the ability to become passionately angry when you see such wicked behavior directed at a helpless child. When you are experiencing anger like this, it is righteous anger you are feeling.

However, when your friend does something you don’t like, and perhaps you feel hurt and unloved because of it, and then you feel anger well up in your heart, it is often unrighteous. The source of your anger is your conclusion that your personal right was denied—your right to always be treated with loving respect by your friend. Your only thought in this moment is for yourself—what your friend has denied *you*, and how violated *you* feel by this unjust treatment. All you can think about is how badly she has hurt you. While there is no denying that friends and family members do hurt us at times, if your only thought is to get even—to make her suffer as she has made you suffer—then your anger is not righteous. It is not focused on how to be a blessing to your friend, but rather on yourself. You have plenty of pity for yourself; but in the anger of the moment, you have no pity for her. The Bible has the perfect prescription for times when we are hurt by others:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed

him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. . . .” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

Melinda quickly saw the unrighteousness of her anger toward Jenna. From her perspective, Jenna kept getting in the way of what she wanted—a perfect Christmas with Mom and Dad; or better yet, a world where Jenna’s problems did not dominate and control everything. Her good desire for a loving Christmas with her parents had become a self-centered desire because her heart not only desired it but *demand*ed it. And when she didn’t get what she wanted, unrighteous anger was the result.

Even very good desires—like fun holiday times with family—can turn into selfish and demanding ones. Melinda could tell that her plan for Christmas was self-focused, because when it was denied, she responded with an explosion of unrighteous anger. Perhaps what Jenna did by dominating Mom and Dad was unjust; Melinda felt a bit justified in her anger. But regardless of that justification, Melinda’s angry reaction brought about “bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander”—all of which the Bible says we are to put away from us (Ephesians 4:31). This indeed was unrighteous anger.

Anger is a volatile passion, and when it is ignited by unrighteous desires, it is destructive. If you permit it to rule your life, it will destroy your closest relationships because no one wants to live around an active volcano. Your family and friends will never be quite sure when you are going to erupt. They will have been hurt too many times from previous eruptions with your explosive words and abusive actions. If you allow angry outbursts to dominate your responses, you will quickly find yourself isolated and alone as people begin to avoid you. Even worse than these consequences, unrighteous anger is sin against God.

“Let’s look at the first chapter of James in the Bible to learn

more about where sinful anger comes from and how deadly it is,” instructed Helen. “In verse 20, James warns us ‘the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.’” Helen then mentioned the tragedy of Cain and his brother Abel. The first murder recorded in the Bible was a result of anger! Helen and Melinda read together the ancient account of this violence.

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him (Genesis 4:3-8).

Clearly, from the beginning of mankind, unrighteous anger has brought about devastating results. Before Helen and Melinda studied the James 1 passage more thoroughly, they also looked at Jesus’ words in His Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus’ association of anger with murder was a sobering consideration; it caused Melinda to take her anger problem much more

seriously. As she thought about the reasons she had come to Helen for counseling, she realized that her initial motivation originated with embarrassment. Her angry outbursts were getting out of hand and causing her to look bad to her family and friends. She needed to show these loved ones that she was not a sinful person. If she could just stop blowing up, others would see her as a godly wife, mother, sister, and friend.

In addition to her anger, Melinda was suddenly ashamed of something else: Pride had motivated her to seek help. And in her pride, she had not thought about God's view of unrighteous anger—how serious a sin it was in His eyes. Her only thought had been to clean up the outside of her life—her behavior. But Jesus' words revealed that her angry heart was a murderous heart. How could this be? Never once had Melinda entertained even the thought of murder, but the connection between the two in Scripture was undeniable. Melinda's motivation for meeting with Helen about her anger was beginning to change. She was ready to see anger as God sees it, to call it what God calls it, and to humbly repent of it. Her heart became soft ground—fertile soil for learning God's ways and changing into the godly woman that she previously thought she already was.

Melinda was now eager to see what the book of James had to say about anger. It was written to Jewish Christians who were experiencing serious persecution for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. While this was not true of Melinda's life, nevertheless, she believed that all of God's Word was written to teach sincere Christians how to live in such a way that God would be honored (Romans 15:4-5). James charged these suffering Jewish readers to "count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). While undergoing severe oppression, some were tempted to use their Jewish theology of God's sovereignty to blame Him for leading them into failure and tempting them to cave under the pressure (1:13).<sup>1</sup>

When disappointments and difficulties arise in your life, you may find yourself struggling with similar reactions. Stress and pain can make it easy for you to seek a nearby target on which to vent your frustrations—often those around you who are weak or the least threatening. Family members or friends who have loved you are the most common targets because you assume they will not retaliate, at least not in a way that will substantially hurt you.

Ultimately, however, your anger is against the One whom you believe permitted this unpleasant circumstance to occur. “How could God allow this to happen to me? He is the one who has backed me into a corner, and I have no choice but to respond the way I do.” Melinda quickly recognized that she had responded in a similar way when disappointment (unrealized hopes for the holidays) and difficulties (dealing with a typical busy mom day) were a part of her life. Her sister had become her target for venting her anger when the disappointments increased; her children had borne the brunt of her irritation with the seemingly impossible task of managing a busy family schedule. She admitted that her anger was ultimately against God, just as happened with the Jewish believers James had written to centuries earlier.

James’s readers felt the same way. They became offended with God, blaming Him for putting them into a situation in which they felt forced to respond in an angry way. In their view, not only was He at fault for the allowing the trial, but also for how they felt compelled to respond to the difficulty. James quickly corrected their wrong theology. In verses 14-15, he declared that God does not coerce His people to sin, and He Himself is never coerced to sin. Instead, each person sins because he is induced by his own lusts—sinful longings and desires. God is not the cause of you being dragged away in temptation; rather, your lust incites you to sin.

The word translated “lust” is predominantly used throughout

the New Testament to describe a strong internal passion. This kind of passion, in and of itself, is not wrong (for example, Paul used the word to speak of a person who *longs* to work in the Lord's service as an overseer—see 1 Timothy 3:1). But unbridled passion or lust that does not submit to the will of God is sinful lust. It is with this perspective that James targeted his readers' problem with their uncontrolled lusts, resulting in their anger against God. There was a raging passion warring within them that had resulted in their sinful zeal (James 4:1-3; see verse 2 for this same word "lust").

Next, James painted a portrait of how sin develops in your heart by using a familiar analogy of pregnancy and birth (verse 15). Lust is the starting point. It's what becomes conceived in the womb of the heart. Just like a baby develops and grows, this lust—this sinful longing or desire—if left unchecked, will mature and expand, often imperceptibly. Then, lust will give birth to sin. What was once a microscopic, secret heart issue has given birth to a full-blown sin (such as anger). Just as a baby cannot stay in his mother's womb forever, so the growing passion of lust will not be able to keep quiet. It will eventually come out for all to see in a clear presentation of wrath.

Finally, when this anger grows to full maturity, it brings forth death. In other words, a baby doesn't live as an infant forever. He will mature and become an adult. But even in his maturity, he is growing closer to the day of his death. Such is the case with sinful anger. It will only boil hotter when left to itself—uncontrolled and unrepented of—and will eventually lead to your demise.

Helen pointed out a couple of insightful truths from this short study in James.

- First, *anger always seeks a target*, perhaps directed toward a particular person or even a collective group of people. All sinful anger, however, is ultimately directed toward God.



- Second, *anger is in many ways an external manifestation of a larger problem going on inside the heart*—namely, there is something that you want (“lust”) that you do not have (such as respect of others, material things), or something that you have that you do not want (such as persecution, disrespect of others, trial, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

Let’s look at James’s counsel starting in verse 21: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” The biblical command “put away” speaks of repentance. The Christian who has allowed desire to morph into sinful anger must repent of this sin. She must repent and turn away from it—“therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness”—and turn toward being the kind of woman God wants her to be—“receive with meekness the implanted word.” The key heart issue that needs to change is your view of yourself and the situation God has placed you in. Your attitude must be one of “meekness” or “gentleness.” The word that James used can also be translated “humility.” Developing a humble, submissive heart to the situation that God has placed you in is critical for your spiritual growth as it relates to your anger.

Furthermore, as you cultivate humility, you must receive the implanted Word. James is, of course, referring to the Word of God. The word he uses for “receive” carries the idea of welcoming the Word. Accept the Word that you already know comes from God. In fact, not only do you know it, but the apostle Peter explains that this Word was implanted in you as a seed that continues to grow in your heart and is producing fruit in your life (1 Peter 1:23). That is why James said this Word has already been implanted within you. So it is to your benefit to welcome the Word of truth, which is able to save your soul.

Melinda could see that this was the work that God's Word was doing in her own heart. It had revealed her "lust" (desires that she had allowed to become demands) and also her prideful heart. In repenting of her demanding heart and pride, she was able to begin to resist the temptations to become angry and verbally attack those closest to her. She began to trust that God knew what He was doing and had only good in mind when He placed her in the situations that previously had caused her such frustration. One of her new memory verses was Psalm 119:71: "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." Meditating on that verse helped her to develop a thankful heart for everything in her day, even the stressful times with her children and the disappointments related to her extended family.

You see, when anger has stubbornly taken up residence in your heart, you well know that it is not always easy to simply welcome the Word of truth into your life. The truth of God's Word slices and dices your behavior and peers into the most shameful recesses of your heart (see Hebrews 4:12-13). Our hearts are resistant to this type of spiritual heart surgery. Thus we must pray that God will help us to humbly *repent* of this sin (Psalm 51:10).

That this was the case in Melinda's life was evident because the Word of God had not become sweet and attractive to her until she had repented of the sins of demanding her own way and the resulting anger that followed. The laying aside of all filthiness and the abundance of wickedness from you will require the work of the Spirit of God in your life (Galatians 5:16-26), and He *will* help you! He will do His part by helping you repent and live for Him, and you must also give all your effort to "receive with meekness the implanted Word." This is God's plan for change, and it will result in a gradual lessening of the control that anger has had in your life.

Furthermore, look at verses 19-20. James wrote, "Know this, my

beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Melinda was especially interested in these verses now, because she knew they would help her make a plan to stop responding in anger. Helen explained that for Melinda to make a commitment to deal with her anger with a self-willed determination was only the beginning. Many people who seek this kind of change fall prey to using human methods instead of God’s method. For example, most secular counselors will urge you to find an inner strength and power, or to simply take out your anger on a substitute. In a psychotherapeutic way of thinking, anger is like a tea kettle of boiling water that will explode unless the steam is allowed to vent.

Some people try yelling into a pillow, hitting a punching bag, or releasing their frustration at a neutral object in order to vent their anger. But from a biblical standpoint, venting your anger does not get at the source. In fact, it is foolish to do this (Proverbs 29:11). Instead, you must turn off the heat under the kettle by approaching this problem as a struggle in your heart—dealing with your lusts before God. To do that, you must be ready and willing to listen, as our Scripture text says.

Listening is hard to do when you’re angry, because true listening involves submission. This requires a silent, inward confession that your demands and anger are not right and that you need the correction and help of another. This is not listening for some audible voice from God, because He has already communicated to you everything you need in His Word. When you try to hear an audible voice, you betray your lack of trust in the sufficiency of His Word (2 Peter 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Instead, listen to God through the truth of His Word—the Bible. It is vital that your heart is surrendered and submissive to His life-changing truth in the Scripture. This the picture-perfect portrayal of surrendering in war: You’ve lost and you need

to listen carefully to God's terms of surrender, because He has won and He is always right.

But you must not stop with just listening. To listen carefully, *you must not continue to speak*. This is difficult for angry people to do, as they are continually engaged in spewing out their opinions and attacks. Oftentimes angry people say they are listening, but at the same time they persist in defending their viewpoint, often pointing out how another person also perceives the situation as unfair, jaded, or misconstrued—and it is clear that they are not really listening.

As Melinda thought back on recent episodes of anger, she found that to be true of herself as well. On one occasion, when she became angry with her husband about an investment he was considering, he asked her to hear him out—to listen fully to what he had to say. She responded, “I *am* listening! I always listen to you. You never want to hear *my* input. Why, Ellie's husband is always proposing these same kinds of things and never listens to her. She agrees that these investments are bad for the long term and wishes that her husband wouldn't keep bringing them up. I'm not the only one who thinks that!”

Melinda realized that she needed to begin to practice biblical listening—that is, listening to God's Word and to others. It is for reasons like this that James warned us to be slow to speak when we are angry. Speaking when you should be listening only interrupts the valuable insight that you are lacking. And what insight does James want you to gain? The implanted Word. You need to humbly submit by listening to and studying God's Word, asking God to soften your heart so that it is open to His work of conviction and growth. Otherwise, as verse 20 says, your anger will never work the righteousness of God.

Essentially, you yourself cannot produce the fruit of righteousness that God wants from you as a believer in Jesus Christ (Galatians

5:22-23). This fruit of righteousness comes from the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in your life, and your anger will always seek to counteract His work. Immersing yourself in the careful study of God's Word—which is biblical listening—will allow God's Spirit to be at work in you, and will strengthen you as you pursue the eradication of unrighteous anger from your life.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Read through James 4:1-3. What does James contend is the source of our fighting and anger?
2. According to verse 2, what kind of fruit does sinful anger produce in our lives? Look at verse 3. Why does God not always honor our prayers? What kind of heart does God seek from us in our prayer life?
3. Next, take a look at the earthly wisdom that James talks about in James 3:14-16. Do any of these characteristics define you? How is anger related to each of these?
4. Now look at James 3:17-18. Does anger fit in any of these descriptions?
5. James 1:19-21 and James 4:1-3 have a lot to say about the condition of our hearts. What can you do now to more actively cultivate the kind of heart God desires?