

HELP!

MY ANGER IS OUT OF CONTROL



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By Jim Newheiser

Introduction

Anger is widespread. A star tennis player forfeits a match because she screams threatening profanities at a line judge. A motorist in traffic expresses road rage by pulling a gun. Every day we hear about crimes of abuse, assault and even murder in our communities. We may hear our neighbors screaming at each other and wonder if we should intervene.

Anger is also a major issue among professing Christians. Jay Adams writes, “Sinful anger probably is involved in ninety percent of all counseling problems.”ⁱ In my experience I am not sure that anger is not involved in the other ten percent.

Angelo’s wife Cheryl betrayed his trust by getting into a compromising situation with another man. She has repeatedly and tearfully confessed her sin to him and sought his forgiveness, but each time she tries, Angelo calls her a whore and threatens to divorce her. “It is over!” he tells her.

Grace gets upset when her husband Rolly seems to ignore her when she tries to address the problems in their marriage. About once a week she flies into a rage, often cursing and sometimes hitting him. Recently she threw a large vase down the stairs. Rolly is concerned for his own safety and that of his children. The neighbors have called the police more than once. Though Grace is usually remorseful the next day, Rolly is considering taking the children and moving out of the home. Grace feels helpless against her rage.

Patty was thrilled to have the opportunity to work as a personal assistant for John, a well-known Christian author and speaker. In recent months, however, Patty has wondered whether she should have taken this job. John’s ministry has been under a great deal of financial pressure and John’s time is over-committed. He then takes out his stress on Patty, frequently chewing her out for minor mistakes. Patty is shocked that this “great man” treats her worse than her secular bosses

did. She doesn't know where to turn and is not sure if anyone would believe her if she told them what John was really like.

Jane has been married to Peter for over twenty-five years. Peter is a domineering husband who micro-manages Jane's life and that of their children (until they reached adulthood and escaped). Peter is constantly grumpy – yelling at the traffic, shouting at the politicians on TV and complaining about the church leaders (who never realized Peter's great potential and therefore kept him on the sidelines). Jane has outwardly played the role of the quiet submissive wife, rarely arguing or retaliating, but inwardly she is full of bitterness. Finally, she realizes that she will never please this man and decides that she can't stand living this way, so while Peter is at work she packs up and leaves. Peter returns home to an empty house, not even having a clue of why his wife is gone.

Bob is a successful Christian businessman who is glad to employ many believers in his company. He uses a substantial portion of his profits to support various Christian ministries. Bob, however, in his drive for success, often publicly berates workers who don't meet his expectations. His Christian employees are shocked by his behavior, but no one has the nerve to confront him. They also notice that Bob seems to change churches every few years.

Why do we act this way?

Angelo would say that Cheryl deserves to be told off after what she did to him. Grace, on the other hand, would admit that she is deeply ashamed after an eruption of rage. She wishes she could stop. Some have told her that her anger may be a disease. Perhaps the right pill would stop her from such outbursts. John would say that Patty's on-the-job failures put the future of the ministry at risk. Peter might say that he just has a strong personality, while Jane would say that now that the kids are grown she doesn't have to put up with being verbally abused by a selfish, angry man. Bob would say that he is a highly driven leader which is what has led to the success of his company that benefits customers, employees, and Christian organizations. Strong words get results. Results benefit everyone.

While different people express anger in different ways, anger is a challenge for every Christian. Some feel powerless in the face of anger. Others try to justify themselves. The question we must address is how can a sinfully angry person become a person of grace? The answer is that the gospel transforms angry people into gracious people.

Understanding Anger

Anger is a concept which can be hard to put into words. You know when you are angry and you can often tell when someone else is angry, but it is hard to give a precise definition. Charles Spielberger, PhD, a psychologist who specializes in the study of anger says, *anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage.*ⁱⁱ Biblical Counselor Robert Jones states, *Anger is our whole-personed active response of negative moral judgment against perceived evil.*ⁱⁱⁱ Or, more simply, anger is an emotion which arises out of a judgment.

All anger seems righteous. Because we are in God's image we have a sense of justice. We become angry because we believe that an injustice has taken place. Sadly because we are fallen and sinful, our view of justice is distorted. The injustice which most offends us is when our rights have been violated. This inward sense of injustice stirs our hearts to desire to make things right or even, which involves executing appropriate judgment or revenge (Romans 12:17-21).

Anger has a physical component. Your body and your soul are connected. What affects one usually affects the other. The American Psychological Association recognizes this reality. *Like other emotions it is accompanied by physiological and biological changes; when you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as do the levels of your energy hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline.*^{iv} We see examples in Scripture of how heart anger affects people physically. When the LORD rejected Cain's offering, *Cain became very angry and his countenance fell* (Genesis 4:5). The physical effect of Moses' anger is described, *as soon as Moses came near the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing and Moses' anger burned* (Exodus 32:19). Biblical words for anger reflect the physical component of anger – burning, trembling, and flaring nostrils. Anger can be linked to sleepless nights, loss of appetite, and digestive problems.

Anger is active. Angry people often act on their anger by words or deeds, some of which can be very dramatic and impactful. For example, Moses *threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them*

at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink it (Exodus 32:19-20).

Anger is not necessarily sinful. God Himself gets angry and justly expresses His holy anger. *The anger of the LORD burned against Moses (Exodus 4:14)... He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury... do homage to the Son, that He not become angry and you perish in the way (Psalm 2:4-5,12). The anger of the LORD burned against that land to bring upon it every curse which is written in this book (Deuteronomy 29:27).* Jesus expressed righteous anger when he drove the money changers out of the temple (John 2:12-17). On another occasion Jesus, *looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...(Mark 3:5).*

When is anger righteous? Righteous anger is rare among sinners like us. Robert D. Jones has identified three characteristics of righteous anger.^v

First, righteous anger reacts against actual sin.^{vi} Those against whom Jesus was angry were guilty of sinfully using God's holy temple for unholy purposes. Spurgeon writes, *We do well when we are angry with sin because of the wrong which it commits against our good and gracious God.*^{vii} If no sin has taken place, we have no right to be angry. For example, if we were to be angry at someone who is late because they got caught in unpredictable traffic, our anger would be unrighteous because they didn't commit any sin.

Second, righteous anger focuses upon God and His kingdom, rights and concerns, not on me and my kingdom, rights and concerns.^{viii}

Because we are sinners we are inclined to make ourselves the center of the universe and to judge those who don't submit to our will. The intensity of our anger is usually not in proportion to the sin against God's kingdom, but rather according to the damage we perceive to our own personal interests. In contrast, Jesus' anger against the temple merchants was motivated by a zeal for His Father's house. In other words, is your anger because God didn't get what He wants, or because you didn't get what you want?

Third, righteous anger is righteously expressed.^{ix} Even when a real sin has taken place and one thinks he is concerned for God's kingdom interests, anger is not righteous if it is expressed sinfully. For example, one may have righteous anger against an abortion clinic in the community because the unlawful taking of human life is a sin against God Who has made humankind in His image. But if this anger is expressed through hateful speech and violence against people and property, the anger is not righteous and does not serve the interests of God's kingdom. My experience in counseling is that many counselees can identify actual sins committed against them and they may claim that their anger is due to their zeal for God's kingdom, but it is rare that such anger is expressed in a God-honoring way. Instead, many resort to destructive speech, bitterness and rage, often feeling fully justified because they have been sinned against.

Anger is deceptive. Hebrews 3:13 warns us against the deceitfulness of sin. Sinfully angry people typically try to justify their anger by claiming that it was righteous. An abuser will say that his victim deserved what she got. A person who has been guilty of a hateful profanity-laden tirade will claim, *I didn't really mean it.* It may be that he now wishes that he had never said what he did, but at the time he meant every word of it. Merely claiming that he didn't mean it will not undo all of the damage he has done. Some try to deny their anger by calling it something else as they shout, *I'm not angry, I'm just frustrated!* It is also common for angry people to say that their anger is caused by something outside of themselves. Often they will blame other people. A pastor claimed that if a certain church elder were to be removed from the board, his anger problem would be solved. An angry woman will say, *If my husband would just change I wouldn't get angry.* We shall see that Scripture teaches that we can never honestly say, *You made me mad!* because our anger comes from within our hearts and is not caused by anything outside of us (Mark 7:14-23). Circumstances and people squeeze us and show what is inside of us. On the other hand, most people can be fairly pleasant if they always get their own way (as if they are like God!). Other people try to excuse their anger by blaming genetics or their upbringing. We will deal with these excuses in the next section.

Anger is dangerous. The comic book Dr. Bruce Banner appears to be a mild-mannered gentleman until he is stressed or angry, which causes him to become the Incredible Hulk, a monster who destroys property and hurts people. Many people who struggle with anger are similar to Dr. Banner. They can sometimes seem quite normal and calm, but when provoked they become enraged and do great harm, especially to those who love them. While many people want to minimize the seriousness of their anger, especially if they have not become physically violent, Jesus teaches that sinful anger is murderous by nature. *You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder', and that 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell* (Matthew 5:21-22). John writes, *everyone who hates his brother is a murderer* (1 John 3:15). Anger in the heart can lead to actual acts of physical assault or murder, as was the case when Cain murdered Abel (Genesis 4:5-8) and when the Jews stoned Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). James warns that sinful heart desires often lead to deadly acts of sin (James 1:14-15). Those who give in to anger are at risk of losing control. *Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit* (Proverbs 25:28). Psychologists also recognize this reality, *when it (anger) gets out of control and turns destructive it can lead to problems at work, in your personal relationships and in the overall quality of your life. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion.*^x In counseling I have been grieved to witness spouses saying hateful things to one another including, *I hate you. I wish I had never married you. You repulse me. I wish you would divorce me. I could kill you.* Such hateful words can never be taken back and create wounds which are very difficult to heal. *With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor* (Proverbs 11:9). *There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword* (Proverbs 12:18).

Paul warns that anger gives the devil an opportunity to wreak his murderous havoc in your relationships. *Do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not give the devil an opportunity* (Ephesians 4:26-27). I once asked a husband whose besetting sin was verbally blowing

up at his wife and child what he would do if a criminal was at the door of his house trying to break in to do harm to his family. He replied that he would fight with all of his might to keep his family safe. I then said that his anger is an equally serious threat to the well-being of his family and that when he gives in to his rage, he is inviting the devil into his home. He needs to resist his anger as vigorously as he would fight an intruder.

Anger, like the love of money, also leads to many other sins. *An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot tempered man abounds in transgressions* (Proverbs 29:22). Sinful anger can lead to the violation of every one of God's commandments. In anger, people have stolen property, committed immorality, lied, murderously destroyed relationships, dishonored parents, and have put themselves in the place of God as lord and judge. Anger is often related to other harmful emotions including bitterness, depression, anxiety and fear.

Anger also is contagious. *Do not associate with a man given to anger or go with a hot tempered man or you will learn his ways and find a snare for yourself* (Proverbs 22:24-25). A harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1). Angry people often tempt others to sinful anger. Entire families and churches can become consumed by this sin. God's grace is the only cure.

What causes out of control anger? Secular psychologists tend to blame either nature (genetic predisposition) or nurture (social environment). The American Psychological Association states, *Some people get angry more easily and more intensely than the average person does... (demonstrating) a low tolerance for frustration, (and are) particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust... One cause may be genetic or physiological; there is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy and easily angered... Research has shown that family background plays a role. Typically, people who are easily angered come from families that are disruptive, chaotic, and not skilled at emotional communications.^{xi}* Some claim that they struggle with anger or rage because of hormonal issues or as the side effect of certain medications.

Scripture deals with most anger as a sin issue. Put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech from your mouth (Colossians 3:8). As we have already seen, Jesus teaches that wrongful anger is murderous (Matthew 5:21-22). While it is possible that some of us may be more tempted to anger because of genetic makeup or social environment, these factors can never be used as an excuse for sinful behavior.^{xii} Each of us is sinful by nature (Romans 3:23 Isaiah 53:6) and we live in a fallen and broken environment. Every person is tempted by sin in various ways. Some who are not as tempted by anger may be more drawn to substance abuse, sexual immorality, or worry/fear. The believer can be confident that God will never allow him to be tempted beyond what he is able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13), and as a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) he has been set free from slavery to sin (Romans 6:3-7).

The Bible teaches that all sin, including anger, begins in the heart. Jesus said, *That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man* (Mark 7:20-23). In the context Jesus is explaining that what goes into a man (unclean food) is not what defiles him, but that which is already in his heart makes him unclean (Mark 7:14-19). In the same way, our external circumstances, including what people do against us, do not make us sinfully angry. All they do is expose the sin which is already in our hearts. That means our hearts must be changed if we are to overcome anger.

We become angry because we want something (too much). James raises the question, *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.* (James 4:1-2a). Secular psychologists recognize the same dynamic. *The underlying message of highly angry people is “things oughta go my way!” Angry people tend to feel that they are morally right, that any blocking or changing of their plans is an unbearable indignity and that they should not have to suffer this way.*^{xiii} When you feel yourself becoming angry, you should

ask yourself, *What is it that I want so much?* The angry person believes that he has a right to what he desires. His anger is active judgment upon whoever keeps him from getting what he thinks he deserves. It is important to understand that it may be that the desire of the person prone to anger is legitimate – i.e. a mother wants her children to be obedient and respectful; or a husband wants his wife to be supportive and affectionate; or a wife wants her husband to pay full attention and understand her; or a boss wants his workers to perform with excellence. Each of the people described in the introduction became angry because others were failing to meet what they believed to be their legitimate desires. But a legitimate desire becomes a sinfully idolatrous desire when it becomes a controlling desire. We know a desire is idolatrous when we are willing to sin in order to get what we want, or we become sinfully angry if we don't get what we want. The answer to idolatry (false worship) is true worship. James continues, *You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures* (James 4:2b-3). Rather than seeking ultimate satisfaction from other people who will often let us down because they are sinners, we need to turn to God to meet our needs. *Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance* (Isaiah 55:1-2). The person who is hoping that other people will meet his needs will never find true peace and satisfaction (Jeremiah 17:5-8) and thus will be tempted to anger when others fail him. The person who seeks satisfaction in Christ will have a joy and a peace which can't be shaken by the sins and failures of others. When angry, ask yourself, *What am I seeking and treasuring more than I seek and treasure Christ?*

Angry people believe that they possess certain rights, including the right to express their anger when their rights are violated. The angry person is self-centered and proud. He tends to minimize his own sin and magnify the sins of others. He is obsessed with what he believes to be his rights. For example, many husbands focus upon the duty of their wives to submit, but seem to spend little time meditating on what it

means to sacrificially love one's wife as Christ has loved the church (Ephesians 5:22-30).

Angry people learn that their anger often gets results. They discover that they can manipulate others with their anger, thereby seeming to get what they want. The mother might say, *My kids won't obey unless I scream at them.* The wife discovers that her husband doesn't do household chores unless she bitterly nags him (but see Proverbs 21:9). The husband discovers that if he acts grumpy and bitter, his wife may try to pacify him with physical affection. There are many bullies in families, neighborhoods, workplaces and even churches who use anger to control others and to get their way.

In the end angry people experience loss, including the loss of their idols. Even though sinful anger seems justified in the moment and despite the fact that sometimes anger produces desired results in the short term, angry people wind up suffering the consequences of their sin (Galatians 6:7-8). The angry person often experiences overwhelming stress, lack of peace, financial loss, and broken relationships as a result of his sin. What real joy is there in getting your way, when others are just placating you and then seek to avoid you whenever they can? Angry people often find themselves alone. The very desires and demands for which they were willing to fight remain unmet.