Coping with Anger

COPING WITH ANGER

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As an impetuous young college student, I had perfected the art of verbal combat to a high level of proficiency. I took pride in my ability to “put down” an opponent, particularly those whom I perceived as being unfair or disrespectful to me or my friends. It is a skill which I recall with some embarrassment today, although the exchange of insults and verbal abuse is not uncharacteristic of young people between 18 and 22 years of age.

After graduation from college and getting married, however, I began to be aware that God disapproved of the way I handled human conflict. “A soft answer turneth away wrath,” I read in Proverbs, and the same theme was inescapable throughout the teachings of Jesus. This was plainly an area wherein the Lord expected me to bring my behavior into harmony with His Word. Yet, the bad habits of childhood are not easily broken.

It seems as though divine providence allowed a series of offensive people to cross my path during that period, each one teaching me a little more about self-control and tolerance. Every time I failed to represent the Christian love I professed, the Holy Spirit seemed to rebuke me in the days that followed. There were many “tests” involved in this learning experience, but the final examination occurred about three years later.

I had decided to surprise my wife with a corsage on Easter Sunday morning, being a firm believer in marital “flower power.” The local florist took my order and promised that an orchid would be ready after 5 o’clock Saturday night. All week long I harbored this noble deed in my generous heart, smiling to myself and anticipating the moment of truth after breakfast the following Sunday.

When Saturday afternoon rolled around, I found a phony excuse to leave in the car for a few minutes, and drove to the florist to retrieve the secret package. The shop was crowded with customers and the
lady behind the counter was obviously overworked and stressed. My first mistake, I suppose, was in not perceiving her tension soon enough, or the beads of sweat which ringed her upper lip. I patiently waited my turn and watched each patron carry his order past me and out the door. When I finally reached the counter and gave my name, the saleslady shuffled through a stack of tickets, and then said matter-of-factly, “We’re not going to be able to fill your order. You’ll just have to get your flowers somewhere else.”

She did not offer a reason or apologize for the error. Her voice had a definite take-it-or-leave-it sound which I found irritating. She stood, hands on hips, glaring at me as though I had somehow caused the mistake.

At first I was puzzled, and then I asked, “Why did you accept my order if you were unable to prepare it? I could have gone somewhere else, but now it is too late to buy a corsage at another shop.”

I remember distinctly that my response was very controlled under the circumstances, although my displeasure was no doubt apparent. My brief question had no sooner been uttered than a curtain swung open at the rear of the building and a red-faced man burst into the shop. He stormed toward me and pressed his chest against mine. I have no idea how big he was; I only know that I’m six-foot-two and weigh 190 pounds, yet, my eyes focused somewhere between his pulsating Adam’s apple and his quivering chin. It was immediately apparent that Goliath was not merely upset—he was livid with rage! He curled his lip upward and shook his clenched fist in the vicinity of my jaw.

For the next two minutes or so, he unloaded the most violent verbal attack I had ever sustained. He used every curse word I knew and then taught me a few I hadn’t even heard in the Army. Then, after questioning my heritage, he announced his intention of throwing a certain portion of my anatomy out the front door.

It is difficult to describe the emotional shock of that moment. It was a conflict I neither sought nor anticipated. Suddenly, without
warning, I had tripped a spring that must have been winding tighter and tighter throughout that hectic day (or year). The next move was clearly mine. Silence fell on the shop as a half-dozen customers gasped and awaited my response.

The toughest part of the encounter involved the instantaneous conflict between what my impulses dictated and what God had been trying to teach me. In a matter of two or three seconds, it seemed as though the Lord said to me, “Are you going to obey Me, or not?”

I muttered some kind of defensive reply, and then did the most difficult thing I had ever been required to do: I turned on my heels and walked from the shop. To the customers, I probably appeared cowardly—especially in view of the size of my adversary. Or, perhaps they assumed I could think of no appropriate reply. All of these agitating thoughts reverberated through my head as I walked to my car.

“Did I go home in triumph at having done what God wanted of me? Certainly not immediately. Hot blood pulsed through my neck and ears, and adrenalin surged through my veins. My immediate response was to do something primitive—like heave a brick through the window where a bouquet of roses sat. Gradually, however, my physiological state returned to normal and I looked back on my restraint with some satisfaction.

The kind of frustration I experienced in the floral shop, whether it be called anger or some related emotion, is of importance to others trying to live the Christian life. I’m not the only one who has had to learn how to control his tongue and the tumultuous undercurrents which often propel it. But what does God expect of us in this area of our lives? Does He want us to be bland, colorless individuals who have no feelings at all? Is all anger sinful? There are many related questions with theological implications which we will consider in the discussion that follows.
What Is Anger? When Is It Sinful?

Let’s begin with the question, Is all anger sinful?

Obviously, not everything that can be identified under the heading of anger is violation of God’s law, for Ephesians 4:26 instructs us to “be angry but do not sin” (RSV). That verse says to me that there is a difference between strong feeling, and the seething hostility which is consistently condemned in the Scripture. Our first task, it would appear, is to clarify that distinction.

Well, how about the emotion you experienced in the floral shop? You were no doubt angry when you walked toward the door. Was God displeased by what you were feeling?

I don’t think so, and I felt no condemnation afterward. It’s important to remember that anger is not only emotional—it is biochemical as well. The unprovoked assault by the store owner was perceived by me as enormously threatening. It didn’t take an extended analysis to figure that out! In such a situation, the human body is equipped with an automatic defensive system, called the “flight or fight” mechanism, which prepares the entire organism for action. Adrenalin is pumped into the bloodstream, which sets off a series of physiological responses within the body. Blood pressure is increased in accordance with an acceleration in heartbeat; the eyes are dilated for better peripheral vision; the hands get sweaty and the mouth gets dry; and the muscles are supplied with a sudden burst of energy. In a matter of seconds, the individual is transformed from a quiet condition to an “alarm reaction state.” Most importantly, this is an involuntary response which occurs whether or not we will it.

Once the flight or fight hormones are released, it is impossible to ignore the intense feelings they precipitate. It would be like denying the existence of a toothache or any other tumultuous physical occurrence. And since God created this system as a means by which the body can protect itself against danger, I do not believe He condemns us for its proper functioning.
On the other hand, our reaction to the feeling of anger is more deliberate and responsive to voluntary control. When we sullenly replay the agitating event over and over in our minds, grinding our teeth in hostility and seeking opportunities for revenge, or lash out in some overt act of violence, then it is logical to assume that we cross over the line into sinfulness. If this interpretation of the Scripture is accurate, then the exercise of the will stands in the gap between the two halves of the verse “be angry . . . do not sin.”

**Not all anger is caused by a threatening situation, is it? What about those responses that are brought on by extreme irritation or hostility?**

All anger produces biochemical changes in the body, although the hormones released through irritating circumstances are somewhat different from the flight or fight system. I might also say that each individual has his own unique pattern of responses. Some people become overheated with the slightest provocation, and others are cool characters who seem to be born with an ability to stay “above it all.” These differences are partially conditioned by environmental circumstances during and after childhood.

**But doesn’t the Bible take an absolute position on the subject of anger? Where does it allow for the individual differences you described?**

Didn’t the apostle Paul write in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, . . . live at peace with everyone”? In other words, we are all expected to exercise self-control and restraint, but some will be more successful than others by the nature of the individual temperaments. While we are at different levels of maturity and responsibility, the Holy Spirit gently leads each of us in the direction He requires, until a moment of truth arrives when He demands our obedience.

**How would you define the emotion of anger?**

Anger is a complicated response which has become a sort of catchall phrase. Many of the behaviors which have been included under the heading of anger may have nothing to do with sinful behavior. Consider these examples:
Extreme fatigue produces a response which has the earmarks of anger. A mother who is exhausted from the day’s activities can become very “angry” when her four-year-old spills his third glass of milk. This mother might give her very life for her child if required, and she would not harm a hair on his fuzzy little head. Nevertheless, her exhausted state of distress is given the same generalized label as the urge which caused Cain to kill Abel.

Extreme embarrassment typically produces a reaction which is categorized under the same worn-out heading. In fact, my reaction in the floral shop was motivated more by embarrassment than hostility for the toothy man who confronted me. I had no desire to hurt him either during or after the encounter. If the two of us had been alone, I think I could have coped with his assault more easily. Instead, there were six or eight onlookers who added the dimension of ego-loss to the episode.

Extreme frustration gives rise to an emotional response which we also call anger. I have seen this reaction from a high school basketball player, for example, who had an off night where everything went wrong. Perhaps he fumbled the ball away and double dribbled and missed all his shots at the basket. The more he tried, the worse he played and the more foolish he felt. Such frustration can trigger a volcanic emotional discharge at the coach or anyone in his way. Such are the irritations which cause golf clubs to be wrapped around trees and tennis rackets to be impaled on net-posts.

Rejection is another occurrence which often generates a kind of angry response. A girl who is jilted by the boy she loves, for example, may retaliate with a flurry of harsh words. Far from hating him, however, her response is motivated by the deep hurt associated with being thrown over—discarded—disrespected.

You see, anger has come to represent many strong, negative feelings in a human being. Accordingly, I doubt if all the Scriptures which address themselves to the subject of anger are referring equally to the entire range of emotions under that broad category.

Then how do the apparently innocent emotions you have described differ from sinful anger?
Your question raises a theological issue which may be difficult to communicate, yet it is of utmost importance to Christians everywhere. The Bible teaches the existence of a potentially disastrous flaw in the character of man which urges him toward sinful behavior, even though he may desire to serve God. Paul referred to this inner struggle in Romans 7:21-24: “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

You see, Paul was speaking as a Christian, yet he admitted the existence of an internal war between good and evil. Anger, jealousy, envy, etc., are products of this inner nature. Paul was not unique in that regard, for the same predisposition has been inherited by the entire human race. David confessed, “In sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5, RSV). It is, in effect, the “sin living in me” (Romans 7:17) as opposed to sins which I commit.

Now, what does this have to do with the subject of anger? Simply this: Our inbred sinful nature gives rise to a response that we might call “carnal anger” which must be distinguished from anger as a function of frustration or the endocrine system, or emotional and psychological needs. It is, instead, contrary to everything holy and righteous, and cannot by any human striving be nullified.

Virtually every orthodox denomination acknowledges the biblical teaching I have described, for it is hardly escapable in the Scriptures. However, great disagreement occurs between Christians in regard to the resolution of the problem. The difference in teaching lies in whether or not it can be cleansed in this life and under what circumstances. It is my belief that the Holy Spirit, through an act of divine grace, cleanses and purifies the heart (see Acts 15:8-9) in order that the “body of sin might be rendered powerless” (Romans 6:6).

Do you believe that no further sin can occur after the evil nature has been removed?
No, the choice is still ours. Furthermore, it is obvious that we remain subject to human frailty and foibles. We stumble into errors and fall short of God’s best for our lives.

Paul asked a vital question in Romans 7:24: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (This body of death made reference to the Roman practice of tying a dead corpse to a person in such a way that he could not extricate himself from it—until the putrefying flesh eventually caused his own death.) Then Paul provided the glorious answer which is applicable to all mankind: “Thanks be to God—[I am rescued] through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

What are the characteristics of carnal anger? What aspect of it does God condemn in the Bible?

I see unacceptable anger as that which motivates us to hurt our fellow man—when we want to slash and cut and inflict pain on another person. Remember the experience of the apostle Peter when Jesus was being crucified. His emotions were obviously in a state of turmoil, seeing his beloved Master being subjected to an unthinkable horror. However, Jesus rebuked him when he severed the Roman soldier’s ear with a sword. If there ever was a person with an excuse to lash out in anger, Peter seemed to be justified; nevertheless Jesus did not accept his behavior, and He compassionately healed the wounded soldier.

There is a vitally important message for all of us in this recorded event. Nothing justifies an attitude of hatred or a desire to harm another person, and we are treading on dangerous ground when our thoughts and actions begin leading us in that direction. Not even the defense of Jesus Christ would justify that kind of aggression.

Are you saying that being “right” on an issue does not purify a wrong attitude or behavior?

Yes. In fact, having been in the church all my life, I’ve observed that Christians are often in greater danger when they are “right” in a conflict than when they are clearly wrong. In other words, a person is more likely to become bitter and deeply hostile when someone has
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E. Stanley Jones agreed, stating that a Christian is more likely to sin by his reactions than his actions. Perhaps this is one reason why Jesus told us to “turn the other cheek” and “go the second mile” (see Matthew 5:39,41), knowing that Satan can make devastating use of anger in an innocent victim.

If anger is unquestionably sinful when it leads us to hurt another person, then is the evil only involved in the aggressive act itself? What if we become greatly hostile but hold it inside where it is never revealed?

John told us that hatred for a brother is equivalent to murder (see 1 John 3:15). Thus sinful anger can occur in the mind, even if it is never translated into overt behavior.

How Do You Deal with Anger?

Many psychologists seem to feel that all anger should be ventilated or verbalized. They say it is emotionally and physically harmful to repress or withhold any intense feeling. Can you harmonize this scientific understanding with the scriptural commandment that “everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19)?

Let me state the one thing of which I am absolutely certain: Truth is unity. In other words, when complete understanding is known about a given topic, then there will be no disagreement between science and the Bible. Therefore, when these two sources of knowledge appear to be in direct contradiction—as in the matter of anger—then there is either something wrong with our interpretation of Scripture or else the scientific premise is false. Under no circumstance, however, will the Bible be found to err. It was inspired by the Creator of the universe, and He does not make mistakes!

In regard to the psychological issues involved in the question, there is undoubtedly some validity to the current view that feelings of anger should not be encapsulated and internalized. When any powerful, negative emotion is forced from conscious thought while
it is raging full strength, it has the potential of ripping and tearing us from within. The process by which we cram a strong feeling into the unconscious mind is called “repression,” and it is psychologically hazardous. The pressure that it generates will usually appear elsewhere in the form of depression, anxiety, tension or in an entire range of physical disorders.

On the other hand, it is my view that mental health workers have taken the above observation and carried it to ridiculous lengths. Professions of medicine, psychiatry, psychology, law, etc. go through fads and trends just like everything else involving human behavior. And for years people working in the “helping sciences” have been obsessed by the need to express anger and resentment. It has almost become the all-time bogeyman of emotional illness, producing some strange recommendations for patients. Some therapists now urge their counselees to curse and slam their fists down on a table, until the expression of anger begins to feel “natural.” This same philosophy was evident in a sixth-grade “alternative” classroom where I saw this statement written on the blackboard: “Hatred is stored-up anger. Therefore, getting mad is a loving thing.” Other manifestations of this trend include assertiveness training and consciousness-raising groups.

In specific response to the question, we must harmonize the psychological finding that anger should be ventilated with the biblical commandment that we be “slow to become angry.” Personally, I do not find these objectives to be in contradiction. God does not want us to repress our anger—sending it unresolved into the memory bank. Why else did the apostle Paul tell us to settle our irritations before sundown each day (see Ephesians 4:26), effectively preventing an accumulation of seething hostility with the passage of time?

But how can intense negative feelings be resolved or ventilated without blasting away at the offender—an act which is specifically prohibited by the Scripture? Are there other ways of releasing pent-up emotions? Yes, including the following:

• by making the irritation a matter of prayer;
• by explaining our negative feelings to a mature and understanding third party who can advise and lead;
• by going to an offender and showing a spirit of love and forgiveness;
• by understanding that God often permits the most frustrating, agitating events to occur so as to teach us patience and help us grow;
• by realizing that no offense by another person could possibly equal our guilt before God, yet He has forgiven us; are we not obligated to show the same mercy to others?

These are just a few of the mechanisms and attitudes which act to neutralize a spirit of resentment.

What do you have to say to the many people who sincerely try to control their anger, but who get irritated and frustrated and still lose their temper time and time again? How can they bring this area under control? Or is it impossible?

I stated before that God dealt with me about my attitudes over a period of several years. He gave me gentle but firm leadership during that time, chastising me when I failed and speaking to me through the things I read, heard and experienced. But finally, there in the floral shop it all came to a head. As I said earlier, it seemed in that moment of conflict that the Lord asked, “Are you going to obey Me or not?”

It has been my observation that the Lord often leads us in a patient and progressively insistent manner. It begins with a mild sense of condemnation in the area where God wants us to grow and improve. Then as time goes by, a failure to respond is followed by a sense of guilt and awareness of divine disapproval. This stage leads to a period of intense awareness of God’s requirements. We hear His message revealed (perhaps unwittingly) by the pastor on Sunday morning and in the books we read and even in secular programs on radio and television. It seems as though the whole world is organized to convey the same decree from the Lord. And finally, we come to a crisis point where God says, “You understand what I want. Now do it!”
Growth in the Christian life depends on obedience in those times of crisis. The believer who refuses to accept the new obligation despite unmistakable commandments from God is destined to deteriorate spiritually. From that moment forward, he begins to drift away from his Master. But for the Christian who accepts the challenge, regardless of how difficult it may be, his growth and enlightenment are assured.

John Henry Jowett said, “The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.” This means that the Lord won’t demand something of you which He doesn’t intend to help you implement.

I hope that this will be of encouragement to those who are facing struggles in this and related matters of self-control. The Christian experience is not an easy way of life—in no instance does the Bible teach that it is. Considerable discipline is required to love our enemies and maintain a consistent prayer life and exercise sexual control and give of our income to the work of the Lord—to name but a few of the many important areas of Christian responsibility. God doesn’t expect instant maturity in each of these matters, but He does require consistent growth and improvement. The beautiful part is that we are not abandoned to struggle in solitude; the Holy Spirit “pities us as a father pities his child” (see Psalm 103:13), tenderly leading and guiding us in the paths of righteousness.
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