

Dealing with Anger Biblically

We're living in an age where the church seems to be chasing after the world. The church looks for the world's approval, admires the world's wealth, covets the world's accolades and generally seeks to imitate the world. One of the most heartbreaking places where this has happened has been in the area of counseling.

Counseling is really a very basic thing. Counseling is simply one believer taking the Word of God and confronting the struggling believer with it, to encourage or admonish him or her to line up with the Word. It is finding the Bible's advice on any situation and then urging the believer to follow nothing but the Bible's advice. Unfortunately, the church has adopted numerous methods from the world and paints them as Christian. The church says, "All truth is God's truth! Therefore if the world has stumbled onto truth regarding counseling, we can use it!" That's true, but consider that 2 Peter 1:3 says: "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:"

God will not have a Word which deals with everything pertaining to life and godliness and leave out crucial details as to how to deal with life, emotions and relationships that would only be discovered in the 21st century. No, the Bible has the answers for mental and emotional problems, too. People generally avoid the Bible for two reasons:

- 1) We like things that are novel. New ideas smack of innovation, fresh discoveries. In our era of scientific discovery, when someone 'discovers' a new method for dealing with anger or hurt or depression, then some assume it must be true.
- 2) We don't like the work needed to study the Bible. The Bible is a big book, it is an involved book, but it is not a closed book. Any believer with a heart to learn and having the diligence to study can find out for himself what the Bible says about topics of life.

We will begin today a series on looking at common emotions and issues that all of us deal with at some point. We will look at anger, hurt, depression, pressure and worry. I must give credit to much of the teaching in here to material from Jim Berg's book, "Changed into His Image" which is available from Bob Jones University Press. Today we want to look at dealing with Anger Biblically.

Anger: it is often a confusing and scary emotion. Some fear it, and consider all anger as negative or sinful. Others think of it as strength, and embrace it all the time. Anger, however you look at it, can be a dangerous emotion. It is a bit like fire – it has uses, and it is not in itself evil, but anger can quickly rage out of control and become destructive.

Anger is really an emotion of displeasure. It is responding with displeasure to something that upsets us, or displeases us. When we are displeased, we are not always angry. You might get caught in a traffic jam and experience displeasure. However, when you take an alternative route, only to find there is a traffic jam there too, it can turn into anger.

The importance of something to you also affects your level of displeasure. When your two-year-old breaks his toy, you are likely displeased. But when he gets up where he

shouldn't be and breaks your treasured family heirloom, you are probably angry. The high significance you attached to the object meant a high amount of displeasure. When we are highly displeased, we are angry.

Anger also is a way of demanding. It says to the people or the situation, "This highly displeases me! Change now! I demand this change to my satisfaction!" Anger is a demand for change. When a slothful employee walks in twenty minutes late repeatedly, the boss's anger says, "This needs to change! This situation is intolerable!" As anger demands, it can also change and forcibly destroy, to bring about this change.

Anger, defined thusly, is not sinful. Jesus Himself displayed this kind of anger when He went to the Temple. There He found all the money changers polluting the sanctity of the Temple. Mark 11:15-19 gives us the account.

Jesus was 'much displeased'. The situation upset him. He felt a strong emotion of displeasure. The significance of the Temple and its importance to Israel's worship, made His displeasure even greater. The blasphemy and the irreverence were multiplied greatly because of where they were doing this. Jesus' displeasure became a voiced demand to the money changers. His demand was not heeded, and He went on to forcibly change the situation: He drove them out.

Anger in itself is not an evil emotion. Jesus experienced great anger over the sin of the people. In fact, God's wrath and anger are important parts of His character. If you do not understand God's anger over sin, you will never understand the necessity of His judgement, and you will never understand the need for His grace and forgiveness. In Scripture, 198 times 'wrath' appears, '234' times, anger appears. It is by no means a minor theme in Scripture. Jesus' anger in the Temple shows that anger can, and must, be righteous. You will get angry in this life, you must get angry. The key is to be angry in the right way over the right things.

Ephesians 4:26 says: "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:" Then a little later in verse 31 he says, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:" Now, is that a contradiction? No – verse 26 encourages godly anger, and puts a time limit on it. Verse 31 commands we put away unrighteous anger altogether. What is the difference?

Well, righteous anger, like what Jesus displayed in the Temple is feeling great displeasure over what God is displeased with. Righteous anger sets out to demand, and often enforce change that will change a situation back to where it pleases God. This kind of anger the Bible says we must not bottle up or effuse. We must have it, but then it says, 'let not the sun go down upon it.', i.e. put a lid on it. Let your anger be like God's – it 'endures but for a moment,' (Psalm 30:5, 103:9) . Even your righteous anger must have a time limit, lest it become bitterness, malice or hatred. Anger over unrighteousness is acceptable, but it does not continue in that state, for it will quickly become something else.

But unrighteous anger is anger over our own interests. It is highly displeased over purely selfish things: the driver in front of us is going too slowly, the person we are

speaking with isn't seeing our point of view, our spouse is blaming us for problems and so on. Our displeasure is purely selfish.

Different people display their anger in different ways. Some people 'explode'; their anger comes out clearly and visibly for others to see. Other people bottle their anger up; they 'clam up'. While people who bottle their anger up inside are generally less destructive to those around them, for their anger is destructive to themselves. Unless anger's energy is directed at the right things (things which make God angry) and for the right reasons (God's reputation), our anger is sinful. Whether expressed externally, or repressed internally, sinful anger is destructive.

How do we deal with it? Well, the world certainly has a lot of methods. In the Orient, people have special sessions to punch airbags resembling their managers, breaking sessions where they get to smash and break things. This is supposed to vent your anger. Some people will give you a little ball to squeeze till your anger goes. Other say, "Go to the gym – Get all that tension out! Punch that punching bag! Get all that frustration out of you". Others suggest, "Play some calming music. Get in a hot bath with bath salts, and let the negative energy float away.' These and a thousand other methods are supposed to deal with our anger.

Now there are at least two problems with these:

- 1) They seem to me to be like people waiting for fires to pop up, and then dowsing them with their particular brand of fire-extinguisher on them. They never seem to deal with the cause of the fires. What is the root cause of the anger? If we deal with that, surely we can save a lot of money in smashed TVs, broken punch bags and so on.
- 2) None of these things are mentioned in the Bible when it comes to dealing with anger. They might sound practical, useful, pragmatic, but if the Bible gives us other advice for dealing with anger, then that is what we must use.

See, unlike these methods, the Bible does not want us to 'vent our anger' It does not even want us to become good at 'controlling our anger'. The Bible does not teach 'anger management'. Rather, the Bible wants us to be so transformed that we get the right perspective on what makes us angry. If we see the things that are making us angry do not make God angry, then we need to renew our minds about them so that we do not respond in anger either. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he". The way you think will control your behaviour. If you are thinking correctly, i.e. biblically, about life, issues and circumstances, you will respond obediently and correctly. So by seeing the things that cause us anger, and getting God's perspective on those things, we root up sinful anger at its very beginning. We do not try to control the fire, or put out the bigger ones, while the embers remain there, glowing, just waiting for the wrong circumstance to blow on them and stir up another fire.

So what are the main causes of sinful anger? We see an account of sinful anger in Numbers 20:1-13. Here Moses is the culprit of sinful anger, and it cost him dearly. The people are complaining and blaming Moses for bringing them into a wilderness where there is no water. They cry out for water, and blame Moses for their predicament. Moses goes to the Lord, and He tells Moses to go and speak to the rock before the people, and water would come out. Moses, in his sinful anger shouts at the people. "And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock,

and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?
¹¹And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts *also*.”

Moses sinned. God told him to speak to the rock and he struck it twice. He was messing up a type of Christ the Rock, which only needs be smitten once for all. Moses was exalting himself; he was using his place of position as a place to vent his personal anger. Because of this anger, God said to Moses that he would not enter the promised land. What a high price to pay, for a foolish display of temper. But his anger was sin, and it was his own fault. What caused Moses’ selfish anger?

Frustration is one cause. Moses was frustrated after leading such a whining, complaining people. When your goals are thwarted, you feel frustration. ‘They never appreciate anything, and are always exercising unbelief’. He was frustrated in his efforts to lead them, and make them pleasing to God. His goals couldn’t seem to be met; he was frustrated.

Hurt is the second one. Moses was hurt that the people accuses him of leading them out to be destroyed. Leaders are frequently misunderstood. Often they create a lot of their own problems, but in Moses’ case, he was the meekest man on earth, and had put his own life on the line to save them. How it must have hurt him to hear the people he had given up the riches of Egypt for, say, “You’re leading us to our deaths! You’re a poor leader! How can we follow you?” Such accusations, because they were false, hurt. It made him angry.

Thirdly, Moses probably felt ***fear***. The people speak of stoning him. He is afraid of them deciding to lynch him for his efforts. Fear causes a backlash of anger. It is the anger of a cornered animal, striking back.

These three things are generally the root of all sinful anger. We hate it when our goals or plans are messed up, and we get angry. We hate it when people say or do things which injure us – physically, mentally, emotionally. When circumstances hurt us inwardly or outwardly, we are angry. And we get angry when we are scared, for we feel a rage that someone should threaten us, and scare us so. We are angry that we should be cornered, and be made to feel vulnerable.

Here is the interesting thing. When God rebukes Moses for his sin, He does not say “Moses, your anger was wicked! Moses, I know you are frustrated, hurt and scared, but your anger is evil!” Listen to what He says in v12: “And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.”

Because *ye believed me not!* Because of your unbelief. God says that Moses’ root problem was unbelief. It was his unbelief that fueled his frustration, his fear, his hurt. How?

Moses was failing to see God in the whole picture. Moses was exercising unbelief in excluding God from the whole scene. The root of every sin is unbelief, and so with the sin of anger. When Moses felt frustrated about his goals not being met, he was not believing that God was in control of the whole Exodus. He was not believing that God ultimately was leading the people, not him. When he felt fear, he was not believing that God would ultimately keep him and deliver him. He was retreating to a selfish

position where he was in control of everything. His unbelief at God's power and promises caused his anger which displayed itself in a striking of the rock twice.

Your biggest obstacle to dealing with anger is a failure to believe that God's way of handling life's problems is the best way. A selfishly angry person is that way because he insists that he must take everything into his own hands. If you are enslaved to anger, you will respond by saying, "No! The only solution is if others change". You will insist that the events or the people around you must change, while your anger is justified. If you demand that others or circumstances change and not yourself, if you refuse to accept God's choices for you in life, you will remain an angry person. But if you are willing to face the issues from God's Word, and allow God to change you from His Word, there is great hope for you.

So where to begin?

First, identify those causes of anger in your life. Ask yourself, what frustrates me? Make a list. Think of everything from start to finish of your day. Ask, what things in my life, past and present, frustrate me? List all that you can think of. What goals, from the simplest daily tasks to your greatest dreams are thwarted and it causes you anger?

Second, look at the list, and consider which of these things would God get angry at. When you get down to it, you'll see, very few. Your husband cracking his knuckles does not offend God. The traffic on the highway does not offend God. The thing then is to think correctly about these things. If they do not offend God, and if God has allowed them, then we must begin to see them as God's sovereign and loving choices for us. When you were due for an interview and the car refused to start, when you did all you could do, accept it as God's sovereign control over the situation. Memorise and meditate on Scriptures that teach and encourage trust in God's control over life – Proverbs 16:9. Hebrews 13:5. See your self-centredness in so much of the frustration and meditate on I Cor 13 'Love seeketh not her own'.

Do the same for the second cause of anger: hurt. Write down all the things past and present, that continue to cause you hurt. Remember, our goal is to not try to change the circumstances hurting us, which most times is impossible, but to change to a godly response to the circumstance. That will mean reading books like 1 & 2 Peter, James and the Psalms. See how God wants us to respond to suffering. Learn the Scriptures that deal with forgiveness, with approaching those that hurt us in Matthew 18. Read Rom 12:14-21 to see how to overcome evil with good.

Do the same for the third cause of anger: fear. Write down all the things that make you angry because they put you in a vulnerable position. Now find Scriptures that deal with fear, John 4:18, the examples of Daniel, David, Peter, Paul, Joseph and others.

Now you may hear all this and get even angrier. You wanted me to give you a way of changing what is causing you to be angry. That may or may not change, and to sit and hope that what is making you angry will change is foolish. That way you may remain angry all your life. God wants you to be renewed. His Word is what renews you. He never asks you to renew others or renew your circumstances. He wants you to renew your mind (Rom 12:2).

See, you can decide when traveling near steep cliffs if you want to have good brakes on your car, or a fully equipped hospital at the bottom. I think the wise choice is good brakes. But many Christians, when it comes to anger, choose the hospital. They are content to never deal with their frustration, hurt, and fear. To search out the Scriptures for truth on God's sovereignty, trusting Him, forgiveness, suffering, fear, seems like too much work. It seems easier to try and 'manage' my anger. After all, it's not such a big problem. They allow their anger through and when their car goes off the cliff, they are content to then go to the hospital of I John 1:9. In the meantime, there is much damage to themselves and more than likely to others. It's so much easier to put good brakes in. Anger, over time, destroys relationships, wrecks families and splits churches.

When you think correctly, when you see your situation as God does, and you will behave correctly. When you see your hurt, your frustration and your fear the way God wants you to, you will not respond in selfish anger. When you understand that your anger is truly unbelief, refusing to believe in God's perspective on your hurt, your fear and your frustration, you will be on the path to recovery. When you accept His Word on those things by faith, you can truly put off sinful anger on a moment-to-moment basis.

I don't think you need to work on being righteously angry. The closer you get to God in your personal walk with Him, the more the things that offend Him will offend you too. What highly displeases Him, will highly displease you too, and your angry reaction will be natural and godly. But a far greater challenge is to truly die to self, allow our ungodly anger to be crucified daily, to reign in what is the cause of our selfish anger and think correctly about those things. May we see sinful anger for what it is – unbelief – and choose to trust God and His perspective on life instead.