

HOW TO GET GOOD AND ANGRY

Paul Anderson

A couple in our congregation once did the following skit on getting ready for church. She calls out, "Honey, how about putting on the CD we always like listening to on Sunday morning?" No response. A little louder: "Mark, could you put on the CD while we're getting ready?" To which he replies, "I can't hear you. I'm in the shower." More volume: "Honey, put on the CD that we always listen to." Response: "What?" I said, "WOULD YOU PUT ON THAT STUPID CD? ON SECOND THOUGHT--DON'T. YOU'RE DEAF AND DUMB ANYWAY!!"

It's amazing how quickly anger rises within us. Karen and I are surprised at the piddly things we get angry about.

I had on one occasion just spoken at a service. A mother came up for prayer, ashamed that she had been so abusive with her children. I knew her and her husband as a fine Christian couple. She asked if I would pray with her for the rage that comes out of her mouth. She couldn't hold back the tears of sorrow as I prayed for her and her children. When I asked the source of her anger, she said she learned it from her parental family. "You mean your mother?" I asked. She responded, "No, my father." I was shocked. I knew him well as mild-mannered, tender pastor. I didn't know him as an angry man.

What gets to you? Maybe people put you down without realizing it, or maybe they do realize it. Or your roommate has irritating habits. Or your neighbor's son plays his music too loud. Or your relative insists on being the center of attention at each family gathering. Or your spouse embarrasses you in public with cutting remarks. You have a right to be angry--and you are. But what are you going to do with it?

Will you stay angry until the responsible parties acknowledge their guilt? You may wait a long time. Will you stay angry until you feel you have paid them back sufficiently? In reality, who gets paid back? Will you get even by sharing their crime with someone else? Congratulations, you just enlarged the problem. Will you fume inside because they have a problem with irresponsibility? You may get stomach ulcers, then who is the irresponsible one? Will you explode at them because you can't take the injustice any longer, thereby making it difficult for them to acknowledge their blame and perhaps even breaking off a relationship? Not much gets solved with any of these responses.

Anger is a subtle emotion. It is often veiled behind other emotions because we are afraid to own it. Perhaps we grew up in a family in which emotions were not expressed, or we've been told that it is wrong to get angry. Maybe we feel justified, but don't know quite what to do with our anger. We certainly are not able to confront the person who made us angry. Some of us would rather keep our anger than do that.

We'd probably be healthier if we were the exploding kind. At least we'd know we were angry and would blow off some pressure. But most of us are the passive variety. That is safer, or so we think. We still might feel like venting, but in more acceptable ways than throwing something or shouting at the top of our voices. We may procrastinate, show up late, lower our performance, obstruct progress, cut with humor, shut off, criticize the offending person to our understanding friends, or use other indirect methods of getting even. At home some of us feel more free about exploding, like my pastor friend. At church or work we are usually more indirect.

Anger is one of the hardest emotions for Christians to deal with because of the confusion regarding it. We don't own it because we aren't supposed to have it, so we call it something else, deceive ourselves, or tear apart our families or the body of Christ with unloving responses to unkind actions. There's got to be a better way--and there is.

The apostle Paul gives us some steps for getting good and angry when he writes, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26,27).

"BE ANGRY."

One of my relative's husband left her and his congregation for another woman. When the counselor she met with asked, "What are you doing with your anger?" she replied, "I don't have any." What she meant was, "I'm not supposed to have any, so I am repressing it." When I get upset with my wife and she says, "Well, don't be angry," I am inclined to respond (with much conviction), "I'm not." Or she may ask, "You're not angry, are you?" as if anger were a terrible sin. I am learning to say, "Yes," and acknowledge the obvious. But that's not easy for some of us, because anger makes us uncomfortable. One time my in-laws were having a serious exchange in the front seat. Grand-daughter Becka in the back seat, feeling the mounting tension, commented, as if to break up a fight, "We not mad, we happy—wight?!" Like Becka, we may prefer to tell angry people they should be different. Happy feels better than mad.

According to a newspaper article, "The average person feels some degree of anger or its lower grade cousin, frustration, ten to fourteen times a day." All the more reason to identify it and accept it.

If anger is a sin, we had better tell God to count to ten and cool it, because He gets angry every day. Ninety percent of the Scriptures dealing with anger in the Bible are referring to God. Where God's love is refused or God's holiness is mocked, God cannot remain indifferent. To do so would put him beyond feeling; it would make him impersonal rather than compassionate. The more one appreciates God's love, the more he can respect His anger. And God's love is just as true in the Old Testament as God's anger is in the New. The Bible doesn't apologize for the anger of its author, although one little girl, hearing about the Old Testament God, reasoned thus, "That was before He became a Christian."

Anger is a God-given emotion. Florence Nightingale was known for her anger against inadequate hospital care. William Carey was angered by the inhumane slave trade in Africa. The anger of Lincoln brought the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation. The anger of blacks riding in the back of the bus led to some much-needed civil rights. Communities are rising up in anger over the violence caused by gangs and are seeking to do something about it. Positive anger can be a motivation for dealing with personal and social wrongs.

Parents need to raise their children in an environment in which they are free to express anger in appropriate ways without being demolished. People who grew up with the admonition, "Don't be angry," didn't obey it; they just stuffed it. Those who concluded that the feelings must be wrong are still dealing with them thirty years later. Repressed anger is, according to some experts, the number one source of depression. When the Bible says, "Be angry," it must be all right.

"BUT DO NOT SIN."

If God gets angry, then it can be godly to get angry. Jesus got angry, so it must be possible to be angry without sinning. The problem is that our anger often leads to sin. Anger is an emotion, a response to a threat, whether to our lives, our character, our opinions, our property, our time. What we do after that emotional response determines whether we sin or not. "If you don't talk it out, you'll take it out," according to an article I once read. Anger turned out leads to aggression, and Cain killed his brother. God commanded him to bring his desires under control. He chose instead to put his brother out of commission. God gave him a healthy warning, but he preferred holding his anger rather than dealing with it.

Anger turned in leads to depression. Jonah was depressed because God didn't do things his way. He's the passive-aggressive kind who often say, "I'm not angry, just hurt." God asked him a good question: "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4). He wanted him to look at his anger, to process it, to do something about it. Jonah thought that he was justified in his anger and wanted God to take his life.

Like fear, anger can serve us well, but it often turns negative. It finds expression in cutting remarks, pouting, silence, withdrawal or attack. Our age has been dubbed "the angry generation." People are pulling out guns on the freeway or in schools, no longer able to cope with life's stresses. We have seen the bumper sticker, "Don't get angry--get even." Vindication somehow seems more socially acceptable than anger. Scripture acknowledges that we will get angry, but we are encouraged to handle it so that we don't sin.

"DO NOT LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON YOUR ANGER."

In other words, deal with it right away. Jesus said, "Make friends quickly with your accuser..." (Matthew. 5:25). Paul admonishes us to put away anger, because anger neglected leads to bitterness. One can have anger without sinning but bitterness is another matter. Bitterness is anger gone to seed. It eats away at the soul like a cancer, affecting both the body and the spirit. Unprocessed anger causes of numerous health problems, the most common of which are headaches, colitis, stomach problems like ulcers, colds and hypertension. In None of These Diseases, author Dr. McMillen writes, "The moment I start hating a man, I become his slave. I can't enjoy my work anymore because he even controls my thoughts. My resentments produce too many stress hormones in my body and I become fatigued after only a few hours' work...The man I hate hounds me wherever I go...When the waiter serves me porterhouse steak with French fries, asparagus, crisp salad, and strawberry shortcake smothered with ice cream, it might as well be stale bread and water. My teeth chew the food and I swallow it, but the man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it. The man I hate may be miles from my bedroom, but more cruel than any slave-driver. He whips my thoughts into such a frenzy than my innerspring mattress becomes a rack of torture."

People deal with their anger in different ways. Here are some examples:

REPRESSION

Those who repress their anger deny its presence. Someone or something told us it is better to swallow anger than to express it. We have all met the nice guy who never gets angry; at least he never shows it. His body is throwing up warning signals that he is not dealing with anger, but he ignores the red lights on the dashboard. Some people regard passive anger a more acceptable than the active kind. Because they may have been condemned for showing their anger at one time, they now burn inside, and no one complains. We won't get criticized for getting an ulcer.

SUPPRESSION

Scripture tells us to restrain ourselves, to be slow to anger (Proverbs 14:17; 14:29; 15:1; 15:18). The old method of counting to ten is one way to suppress anger. Suppressing anger can give us time to cool off when our "engine" has overheated. The problem with suppression is that we may be only hiding anger in the subconscious and not dealing with it effectively. Anger stored down under stays there and will eventually come out, perhaps as a migraine.

Anger debilitates us. The passive variety shows itself in quiet aggression like sloppiness in work or unresponsiveness in relationships. Destructive habits like overeating or alcoholism are other possible symptoms. We tend to choose the passive activity because it is more socially acceptable than the expression of anger and because it is culturally permissible to annihilate our lives with destructive emotions.

EXPRESSION

"Getting it all out" provides a way to be released emotionally. Walking around the block, punching a pillow, or hitting a golf ball constitute some ways to give expression to anger without taking it out on other people. The best fight I ever had with my wife started over the kitchen sink. She began raising her voice (as she was more accustomed to do). I remained subdued during the first few moments of our "intense fellowship." Finally I had experienced enough "injustice," and I yelled at her, totally out of character for my quieter demeanor. We both broke into laughter at this strange turn of events, and the round was over.

Getting it out proves better than stuffing it, especially if one takes it out on a ball rather than on a brother. In some psychological research, according to Neil Warren (Make Anger Your Ally) and Bill Backus (Telling Yourself the Truth), aggressive response to anger, even if "harmless," has been shown to increase one's tendency for more aggression. Solomon must have read the report. He said, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (Proverbs 29:11). Our angry generation has a lot it is fed up with--our parents, our bosses, our teachers, our law enforcement, our justice system, our government, our society. We

have been encouraged to "tell it like it is," but that doesn't solve all our problems. Maybe there's a better way.

CONFESSION

To confess does not necessarily mean to drop to our knees and acknowledge that we have blown it again. It literally means "to say together." We may simply acknowledge to God, "I am very angry with this situation. I just got a pile of garbage dumped on me." The psalmist wrote, "Be angry, but sin not; commune with your own hearts on your beds, and be silent" (Psalm 4:4).

Or we might find it necessary to be lovingly confrontational to the person who provoked the anger. I have found it helpful in my marriage (it took me years to learn this) to state how I am feeling about something. It helps to divert a stronger response, and it communicates to my wife so that she can consider her response. It is different from "telling it like it is" because it is more controlled and, therefore, less hurtful. Its purpose is to communicate, not to condemn. Scripture encourages us to address problems straightforwardly in this manner (Matthew 5:37; 18:15), a better option than pretending or self-deception.

Sometimes, however, we do need to "drop to our knees." We have tried to justify our hostility toward a child, a neighbor, or a boss. In reality, we have come to see our pride, our pettiness, our impatience, our insensitivity. Either we can hold onto our irritability in a futile attempt to get even, or we can confess our sin and then extend forgiveness to the offender.

This means recognizing our anger in order to confess it appropriately or confront others. Physical and emotional clues serve us like the temperature gauge on the car, signaling a need to pull over and cool off. If we recognize it, we can accept responsibility for it. Other people do not "make" us angry. Anger remains our response, not theirs. Owning our anger precedes dealing with it. We do not assume responsibility for life as it comes to us, but we are responsible for our responses. "You made me angry," usually means, "I am not responsible for my anger," which may also mean that I can stay angry until you deal with what is making me angry. Or "I'm not angry, just concerned," really means, "I'm angry, but showing concern is more acceptable than getting angry."

"AND GIVE NO OPPORTUNITY TO THE DEVIL."

Destructive emotions need to be dealt with, although removing them can be painful, even as the removal of a tumor from the body is both essential and painful. When my car overheated on the way to the desert, I thought I could make it over the top of a hill and coast down. Paying \$488 for blown head gaskets taught me a different lesson. Damage to a piece of metal is one thing; damage to people proves more costly. Anger not properly discharged leads to hostility. While anger is an emotional response, hostility is an ongoing attitude, one that endangers those who hold it as well as its object. Anger is energy; it is a fire that burns within us. When we say, "That really burns me," we are closer to the truth than we may realize. A bee that stings someone lives only about thirty minutes; otherwise it lives for six months. Hostility takes its toll on us, too. We pay a high price for bitterness. Even justified anger can still ruin the engine.

Scripture urges us not to let the sun go down on our anger. A pastor friend compares it to manna. God told the children of Israel to collect enough manna for each day. What was left overnight turned sour. Anger unattended turns rotten and becomes the devil's opportunity to poison us.

Clench your fist for a moment. You are modeling the posture of bitter people. And even if the fist is not clenched, the heart is. It blocks our ability to receive from God or to give to people. That is why James wrote, "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Js. 1:19,21). Bitter people need healing of the cancerous growths within them, so they can receive God's word and live as whole people. Anger is a response, not a root problem. It is the result of hurt (physical or emotional), frustration, or fear. We need to get at the root cause of our anger and bring it to God for his healing. It may take days, weeks or even months. If a situation that should evoke a reaction of three gets a ten, it's a clear indicator of hidden anger.

You may wish to take these steps to deal with anger:

- a. Acknowledge it. This helps to defuse its intensity so that the emotions can be expressed in more controlled ways. When someone makes you irritable, you can say inside, "This is making me mad."
- b. Give your anger to God. "Cast all your anxieties upon him..." (I Peter 5:7).
- c. Confess where anger has turned to sin. Acknowledge where you brood over the inconsistencies of others.
- d. Forgive those you are hostile with. God wants to free you from the tyranny of resentment. The same Lord who said on the cross, "Father, forgive them" is available to help you with the process.
- e. Learn listen! The normal way we express our anger is through the mouth. Being slow to speak can help us harness a habit of anger. "He who restrains his lips is prudent" (Proverbs 10:19).

Ultimately, we trust the Holy Spirit to produce in us over time the fruit of patience. We cannot accomplish this, but God can, so that we can be angry—and sin not!
