

Anger: Don't Let it Destroy You

A young couple recently admitted that they were blindsided by anger in their relationship. The wife didn't even realize how much anger was in her heart. She grew up in a home where anger was not handled well. She vowed not to let it be part of her life but the intensity of marriage produced too many occasions for anger. "Why is it so hard to recognize an anger problem in your life?" she asked me. "Perhaps" I recommended, "because anger always carries an element of self-justification." When we feel "right" to be mad, we don't see our anger as a destructive force. Often, as with this couple, anger isn't fully recognized until the damage is too great to be ignored.

I've read that ninety percent of all counseling on relationship difficulties involves the problem of anger. This corresponds well with my experience over the last 24 years of pastoral counseling. For some people anger is a serious personal problem. Others face the challenge of living or working with people who don't control anger. When we say, "It doesn't take much to set him off" or "You have to walk on eggshells around her", we are referring to people with severe anger management problems.

Some people are always angry; others store up their anger for periodic (often unpredictable) explosions. Even more frustrating are those who lash out on those close to them while *publicly* hiding their tyrannical ways behind a pleasant façade. How sad when strangers receive more kindness than those close to us. Many relationships (especially marriages) have been destroyed by anger.

The fact that anger itself is an important component to healthy living makes anger a cloudy issue for those who have severe problems with it. Anger is not *always* a wrong response. But handling anger rightly requires a careful look at what it actually is and how it works. Anger has been described as a strong feeling of irritation or displeasure. It's an emotional readiness to defend or retaliate. Anger can be directed toward people, things, or circumstances. It can be rational or irrational; beneficial or destructive. Anger is often related to our sense of right and wrong. The person deficient of strong displeasure toward evil lacks good moral character. Scripture even associates a righteous anger with God. Yet, unlike humans, God is only angry when it is right to be angry.

"Sometimes we get involved in a legitimate issue and discern, perhaps with accuracy, the right and the wrong of the matter. However, in pushing the right side, our own egos get so bound up with the issue that in our view opponents are not only in the wrong but attacking us. When we react with anger, we may deceive ourselves into thinking we are defending the truth and the right, when deep down we are more concerned with defending ourselves."

"In none of the cases in which Jesus became angry was his personal ego wrapped up in the issue. More telling yet, when he was unjustly arrested, unfairly tried, illegally beaten, contemptuously spit upon, crucified, mocked, when in face he had every reason for his ego to be involved, then, as Peter says, 'he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats' (I Peter 2:23). From his parched lips came forth rather those gracious words, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Let us admit it - by and large, we are quick to be angry when we are personally affronted and offended, and slow to be angry when sin and injustice multiply in other areas." (D. A. Carson).

For humans, Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the need to *control* anger. “The fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control” (Proverbs 29:11).

How well do you handle anger? Do you internalize it? Perhaps you withdraw from conflict by leaving the room, hiding behind work or other activities or turning to substance abuse. Sadly, this response never resolves anything; it fails to deal with root causes of anger. Internalizing anger often leads to more subtle forms of expression - manipulative mood swings, sarcastic verbal jabs, slander, and other less aggressive responses. Equally tragic is the person who internalizes anger in public and redirects it to undeserving family members. The scenario looks like this: The boss yells at an employee. The man takes it out on his wife. The wife yells at the children. The children kick the dog. The dog bites the cat ... Sound humorous? In real life, it's misery.

Others externalize anger with direct aggression. When provoked, this person lashes out with verbal and physical attacks on the object of his anger (or the most accessible object). This response often leads to violence and abuse. It leaves a trail of broken people and damaged property - tending to multiply until a major crisis occurs.

Scripture highly commends those who control anger. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city” (Proverbs 16:32). “A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression” (Proverbs 19:11). The emphasis on being slow to anger warns us to respect its power and control. It's wise to be aware of anger producing situations and anger provoking people. Knowing the sources of anger can help us minimize it.

Sources for anger include: An unorganized life, over commitment to low priorities, unresolved guilt, hurtful experiences from our past, unfulfilled expectations, violation of legitimate or perceived rights, feeling misunderstood or unappreciated and imposed circumstances out of one's control.

Learned patterns of anger are a much deeper issue. Parents who do not handle anger properly pass their habits to their children. Scripture warns about learned anger: “Do not associate with one given to anger, and with a wrathful man do not keep company, *lest you learn his ways* and get yourself in a snare” (Proverbs 22:24-25). People with serious anger problems should seek counseling before their destructive ways destroy others.

To handle anger constructively, we need to identify the sources without blaming behavior on others. We must take full responsibility for our actions if we hope to gain freedom. Rationalizing and justifying anger only leads to more destructive consequences. The first step to victory is to acknowledge that you *can* control your anger with God's help.

Several other action points are important for conquering anger. Admit your failure to value the objects of your anger. Avoid reading into the actions of others. Communicate instead of exploding. Refuse to allow anger to escalate. Resolve anger daily! Scripture says, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). Replace anger with kindness and love - remembering the love God has shown to you.