

Advice from Jesus about Anger

Have you managed to avoid ever getting angry? ... Let me try something easier. Have you managed to avoid getting angry this week? ... Well, have you managed to avoid getting angry so far today? After all, Jesus said,

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. ... But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matthew 5:22)

If I had to come before a judge each time I got angry, I'd be in court any number of times every day. I might as well move in.

It seems to me that anger is a normal part of life, pretty much every day. That's not necessarily a bad thing, either. Without feeling anger sometimes, we could let circumstances take advantage of us. Anger can give us the energy to defend ourselves and defend others who are helpless or vulnerable. What I hear Jesus saying is not that anger itself is bad, but that how we handle it matters.

Even God gets angry

Even God gets angry sometimes, and for good reasons. Listen to what David had to say in Psalm 18:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies. ... In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. (Psalm 18:2-7)

David called on God when he was in trouble, and God was angry at the treatment David was getting.

God even got angry with his own chosen people, usually when they behaved badly and didn't follow his directions. Actually, this happened fairly often, because they had plenty of chances to get off track.

How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire? Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name; for they have devoured Jacob and destroyed his homeland. Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need. Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake. (Psalm 79:5-9)

Time after time the people of Israel wandered away from their God, and the God who loved them let them live with the consequences of their behavior. Their distress, of course, was intended to bring them to repentance and back to faithfulness.

Jesus got angry too

We even see times when Jesus was angry in the gospels. Do you remember the time?

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables

exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:13–16)

Jesus didn't quietly go to the temple management to ask for a change in policy. His zeal for the holiness of the temple was unavoidable. His forcefulness got everyone's attention to a disgrace they had simply gotten used to.

Paul is very clear that our anger should not get in the way of our relationships with each other. He said to the people in Ephesus:

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:25–27)

Anger can lead to bad behavior

Anger happens, but we need to deal with it and not let it fester. When we have a problem with someone, we need to deal with it as soon as possible. Once we go to bed angry, all sorts of unfortunate ideas can roll around in our heads. "He must have ..." "She must be ..." Before you know it, we can find ourselves justifying paying the other back. Maybe even with interest.

James talks about the way that we can easily be led into sin. He said:

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. (James 4:2)

We see something that our neighbor has, and we want one too. We can see our neighbors' faults, and it doesn't seem fair that they have all the good stuff, while we don't get our share. Next thing you know, we're angry about the unfairness of it all. And once we get angry, doing something to equalize things doesn't seem so bad.

It's even worse when the advertisers get ahold of us. Whether it's the high-priced chocolate or the fanciest car, they're constantly showing us how much people with all the goodies are enjoying themselves. You should be having so much fun when you take a bite of chocolate. And how come my hair doesn't swirl around and shine even when I use their shampoo?

We're bombarded with pictures of how great it feels when we have their products, but the products never seem to live up to their promise. Worst of all, we're constantly told that we deserve the best. No wonder we get angry at the ones who seem to have it all.

How can we keep anger from leading to sin?

What can we do with our anger to keep it from leading us into major sin? We need to deal with it quickly, before it grows into something worse. Jesus said,

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Notice that Jesus isn't specific about what the issue might be. What the other person has against you could be their fault or it could be your fault. They could have stepped on your toe, or you could have stepped on theirs. It doesn't matter what the cause was. If there's something

between you, you need to take the first step to fix it, before you come to God. This is not an easy assignment.

If you're the one who caused the problem, the solution is in your own hands. You're the one who can repent of your action and go to apologize and make amends. We all know that making things better isn't easy, and it may take some humility and work. But when we're in the wrong, resolving the problem is something we can do for ourselves.

What happens our when anger is justified?

When someone else has hurt us, the solution to the problem is a little different. We're hurt and justifiably angry, but we still need to do what we can to resolve it. Jesus gave us a recipe for this kind of situation in Matthew 18. He said,

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15–17)

Sometimes this is translated to say “another member of the church,” which makes no sense since there weren't churches in those days to be a member of. The actual word he used in Greek was “**ἀδελφός**” (adelphos), which means brother. This brother (or sister) can be any person with whom you share some kind of relationship.

So what do you do when someone sins against you, does something that hurts you or even seriously harms you? According to Jesus, first you try to talk with that person yourself. What should you say? Well, “You turkey, you really screwed up!” is not a good way to start. You may feel like that, but it won't be helpful. And Paul says,

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29)

You need to think about what you can say that the other person will hear. You need to explain yourself, say what you feel and what happened to you, in a way that doesn't attack the other person. This will take some thought.

What do you do when the other doesn't listen to your best attempts to reach out? Then another process from scripture becomes important. In the law it says,

One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. (Deuteronomy 19:15)

You don't go around gossiping, but you find two or three others to help show the one who hurt you the harm that was done. If the person still doesn't hear you, then you get the help of the church community. Hopefully when people who care about both of you are involved, the other will be able to hear. But what happens if all this sympathetic help doesn't resolve the problem?

This last resort is a recommendation that's often misunderstood. Jesus says that this person should “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus says to treat this person like a stranger. This has led to the process of shunning, of treating this person like an outcast, and not speaking to them at all. But Jesus doesn't say to treat them badly.

He says to treat them with the same courtesy you would give a stranger. You're supposed to treat them like a person with no history. You don't have to be angry with them, because you don't even know them. But you do owe them the same courtesy you'd give anyone else you don't know. You can greet them, give them directions, even help them in trouble, but not invite them into your home or your life.

How can love replace our anger?

However, Jesus gave us an even more difficult commandment. He said,

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27–28)

Anyone who thinks this is easy hasn't tried to do it.

Jesus isn't talking about strangers, people you don't know. He's talking about people who are in your face, and not in a good way. He's talking about people who hate you, and none of us likes to be hated. We're supposed to love the person who turns away when we smile, the person who pushes us out of the way, the person who doesn't return our calls, or the person who hates us because of our family, our race, our faith, or our ethnic background.

Plus we're supposed to love those who mistreat us, those who actually do us harm. This includes the one who stole the job we were waiting for, the one whose nasty child hurt our child on the playground, the one who stole our wallet and wrecked our credit rating, and even the one who ignored us when we were desperately asking for help.

The people we really want to see fall into a mud puddle, or worse, are the very ones that Jesus expects us to be nice to. We're supposed to love even those who cause us serious pain and suffering.

Love is willed intention and action for the good of another person. It's not a feeling and not simply doing what they want, or what we think they want. It's not something that can be "earned" or "lost" by particular actions or behavior. Love respects the other's identity and does what is for that person's own good.

Love prevents others from doing harm or evil, since supporting good also means discouraging sin. Loving enemies doesn't mean approving things they've done or agreeing with positions they hold. We're expected to be fair and kind to truly wicked and ungrateful people, just the way God is fair and kind to all of us.

Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies, to ask the best for the very ones who make us angry. I think that we all try, at least sometimes, to love our enemies. I hope that we all feel that sometimes we've actually succeeded in loving our enemies.

But here is a test. I don't remember who first asked me this question, but it brought me up short. The question is "How would you feel if you knew that your enemy, the one who caused all that trouble, was going to get into heaven?"

Get into heaven? Not only would I have to put up with them here on earth, but live with them for all eternity in heaven? That was asking too much. I might try to live with them here, but I always thought they'd get what they deserved when they came to judgment. Aargh! Why should they get a free pass?

And then I realized what I was thinking. If I can have forgiveness of my sins through Jesus, so can anyone and everyone else. People I like and people I don't like are all equally

welcome to come to him. In fact, I'm supposed to want that. I'm supposed to hope and pray that even the nastiest and most evil people on earth will come to Jesus and find forgiveness.

My prayer shouldn't be "Lord, give them what they deserve" but "Lord, welcome them into your love and your kingdom." I hope that I and all of us can grow to truly pray for the good of our enemies with an open heart.

Anger is always a part of our lives

While we're still on this side of eternity, we'll still experience anger, probably pretty often. I believe that as long as we don't let anger drag us into sin, there's a lot we can learn from it. Our anger shows us how we feel. It warns us when we're threatened. It lets us know when we see or experience injustice. It makes us aware that an issue is too important to ignore.

When I was a manager in business, I was told that anger is too valuable to waste. If you just spread it around, it becomes meaningless. You save it to use as punctuation when something is important. When you're talking, feeling is the difference between a period and an exclamation point. "Don't ever do that again." is different from "Don't ever do that again!" When something is really important, you let your feelings show. That way people can tell when they need to pay extra attention.

Anger can be the energy behind your effort to make changes. It can fuel the motivation that gets you going to right a wrong. It can give you the strength to keep going in the face of opposition.

Using your anger, directing it, can provide the determination to make a real difference for the benefit of others. Jesus is clear that anger is not to be used against others. Taking the advice of Jesus and Paul, to be angry without sinning, makes it possible to turn anger into the energy to do good.