

# ANGER!



MAX DONER

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# ANGER!

## 1. Righteous Anger

*“Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil.”—Ephesians 4:26-27*

### A. Introduction

We will consider the biblical subject of anger and wrath because anger is a prominent experience in every one of our lives. It is also the subject of a great deal of biblical revelation. If we are to grow spiritually, it is imperative for us to properly understand anger in three ways: whether it is right or wrong, how it is to be expressed, and how to manage it in our lives—and in the lives of our children.<sup>1</sup> Anytime we discuss anger, we have to ask, What about righteous anger? Before we consider sinful anger and how to deal with it, we need to understand the form of anger that is not sinful. The pivotal passage dealing with righteous anger, probably more than any other in the Scripture, is Ephesians 4:26-27.

It is important for us to understand that when God created us, He created us with an intellect, the ability to think; and He created us with a will, the ability to choose—but He also created us with emotions, our feelings. Our emotions include, for example, love, anger, joy, hatred, fear, peace, jealousy, and loyalty. These are all emotions that rise up within every one of us. Sometimes we think that some of these emotions ought to be repressed or done away with, things like fear, worry, anger, and hatred. On the other hand, we think there are other emotions that we ought to reinforce and cultivate, such as love, joy, and peace. But this is a false dichotomy.<sup>2</sup> One English Puritan<sup>3</sup> has said, “The affections are not, like poisonous plants, to be eradicated; but as wild, to be cultivated.”<sup>4</sup> God has given our emotions to us, the full

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<sup>1</sup> This material is intended for believers in Jesus Christ, who have experienced the life-transforming power of the gospel by being made new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:1-10; 2Co 5:17). In our natural sinful condition before being made new by the Savior we are utterly unable to rightly understand our own hearts, our sins, and God’s commands (Jer 17:9; Rom 8:8). But once God has given life to a sinner, and they repent of their sins, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation, and begin to walk with God, they can and do fight sin and seek to become more like our Savior in daily life. Responding biblically to anger is a part of this daily walk with God. To learn more about what it means to be born again, and turn from a life of sin to the Savior Jesus Christ, please see *Look to Jesus* by William Reid or *What Is a Biblical Christian?* by Albert Martin, both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>2</sup> **dichotomy** – division into two parts.

<sup>3</sup> **Puritan** – member of the English Protestants who called for “purification” from unscriptural practices in the Church of England during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their legacy serves God’s people today in the many reprints of their excellent Bible teaching.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Richard C. Trench (1807-1886), *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Ninth Edition, 1880 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978); 134.

spectrum of our emotions, and these are not sinful in and of themselves. But any one of them can *become* sinful when they are improperly handled or misdirected.

One man has said that the emotions “were given man as winds to fill the sails of his soul.”<sup>5</sup> Our mind is what we think with and our will is what we choose with, but very often it is our emotions that provide us with drive and motivation to do the things that we do. As Christians, we do not embrace the doctrine of the Stoics,<sup>6</sup> who say that emotion is evil and is to be completely suppressed. But we also recognize that our emotions need to be controlled and directed. The biblical principle is not that anger is evil, but rather that anger must be properly exercised and controlled. Anger is a good emotion *if* it is properly directed—and that is a big “if.”

## **B. The Command to Be Angry**

Ephesians 4:26 has the commandment to be angry: “Be ye angry.” In the original Greek, this is in a present imperative verb form: it means to be constantly angry, continuously angry. You never would have thought that you would come across such a statement in Scripture. The word here translated “anger” is the Greek word *orge*, which means wrath or indignation.<sup>7</sup> It carries the concept of an anger that is deep-seated and long-lasting. In other words, this is not a superficial or transient anger, but rather a deep-seated sentiment with elements of awareness and deliberation. This is definitely not a blind flash of anger. *Orge* here calls us to a deep-seated sentiment with elements of awareness and deliberation attached to it, which is guided by reason and results in a settled habit of mind. All of those concepts are wrapped up in this word *orge*. It is not a flash of temper or a sudden emotional outburst, but rather a deep-seated reasoned anger that is a constant attitude of the mind.

Why does God command believers through the apostle Paul to be angry? People often ask, “Isn’t anger sin?” For example, when you look at verse thirty-one of this same passage, it says, “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, *be put away from you*, with all malice.” People look at such passages as that and say, “Anger must be sin because we’re told to put it away from us.” What is important to understand is that anger, like every other emotion, *can* be sinful indeed, but it is not necessarily sinful.

One of the things we know about God is that He cannot sin, and yet the Bible tells us that God “is angry with the wicked every day” (Psa 7:11). In fact, if you looked up every reference to anger, wrath, and fury in the Scripture, you would find that the Bible talks a lot more about the anger of God than the love of God. Time and time again we are told that God is angry, even full of fury and wrath. For example, John 3:36 says, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” “Wrath” here is this same word *orge*. God exercises anger or wrath. Romans 1:18 says, “For the wrath of God [i.e., the anger of God] is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” Thus we see in the Scriptures that God is angry.

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<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, Book VI, Essay 31, “On Moral Virtue.” Plutarch (c. AD 46-120) was a Greek historian, biographer, essayist, and follower of Plato. Quoted by Trench, *Synonyms*; 133.

<sup>6</sup> **Stoics** – members of the Greek school of philosophy founded by Zeno about 308 BC, believing that people should repress emotion, be indifferent to pain or pleasure, and accept calmly all occurrences as the unavoidable result of divine will or natural order.

<sup>7</sup> **indignation** – displeasure at something deemed unworthy or unjust; righteous anger.

In Mark 3, there was a man who had a withered hand, and the Pharisees were watching Jesus to see if He would heal on the Sabbath day. Jesus asked them, “Is it lawful [i.e., appropriate] to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil?” He could see the hardness of heart and the resistance they had toward Him. Then the Scripture tells us, “When he had looked round about on them *with anger*, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other” (Mar 3:5). It is the same word *orge* that is used here. So, Christ Himself was angry. We read in Revelation 6:16-17,

And [the people] said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the *wrath* of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

Once again, the same Greek word is used. Clearly, both God the Father and God the Son express anger.

The point is this: anger is not always sin. In fact, not to be angry may be sin in some cases because we are commanded to be angry. If we are not angry when we are supposed to be, we are disobeying God and engaging in sin! The motive and object of our anger are the crucial determinants<sup>8</sup> as to whether our anger is sinful or not. John Trapp, the old commentator,<sup>9</sup> had this to say: “He that would be angry and not sin, let him be angry at nothing but sin.”

Notice that whenever you see the anger of God it is anger at sin. God is not angry at anything else. And when *we* are commanded to be angry, we are to be angry at the same things with which God is angry. The Bible tells us in Ephesians 5:1 to be “followers [i.e., imitators] of God, as dear children.” And if anger is one of the moral characteristics of God, then it ought to be one of ours as well. But we need to be careful: we must imitate God in *His* anger, so that our anger is directed at sin and motivated by outrage at sin—and not anything else.

There are many examples of godly, biblical anger. In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul writes about the repentance<sup>10</sup> of the Corinthians with reference to the sins that had crept into the church. Paul said that these people had genuinely repented of these sins. The evidence of their repentance is recorded for us in 2 Corinthians 7:11, “For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort.” In other words, when you saw your sin, which I wrote to you about in 1 Corinthians, you were sorry for these sins and that sorrow was a godly sorrow. We know it was godly sorrow because it was marked by certain characteristics. He says, “what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation.” In other words, these people were angry at the fact that they had sinned; they were very upset over the fact that sin had crept into the assembly, and that they themselves had given in to it. They were angry that they had hurt the God of love and dishonored Him. All of these emotions rising up in them toward their sin were proof of the genuineness of their repentance.

Another example is that of King Saul in 1 Samuel 11. The Ammonites had come to the walled city of Jabesh to destroy it. But they offered to spare the city if the men of Jabesh would

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<sup>8</sup> **determinants** – determining agents or factors that decide an outcome.

<sup>9</sup> **John Trapp** (1601-1669) – English Anglican Bible preacher and writer. His five-volume commentary is read today and known for its pithy statements and quotable prose.

<sup>10</sup> **repentance** – turning from sin to God by grace through faith in Christ. See Free Grace Broadcaster 203, *Repentance*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

come out so that the Ammonites could poke out their right eyes and make them servants and captives. The men of Jabesh replied, in effect saying,

Let us see if there is anyone to deliver us, and if there is not, we will give in because there is no way we can win against this army—it is better to lose an eye than to lose our life.

So they sent messengers to Saul. And the Bible tells us in 1 Samuel 11:6, “And the *Spirit of God* came upon Saul when he heard those tidings, and his *anger* was kindled greatly.” The passage ascribes the anger of Saul directly to the influence of the Holy Spirit! And what was he angry about? He was angry that these cruel and wicked Ammonites wanted to severely abuse his people.

In another example, we see in Nehemiah 5 that the children of Israel had fallen into financial hardship. They had mortgaged their lands, their houses, and even their children because there was a great drought. Those who were wealthy had loaned them money and taken their possessions in repayment of the loans, and now these people could not redeem their children and had no more money for food! Nehemiah was very angry at the rich for taking advantage of their poor brethren. In Nehemiah 5:6, Nehemiah tells us, “And I was *very angry* when I heard their cry and these words.” His anger motivated him to bring justice against the rich who were oppressing the poor. It was a righteous anger.

We could multiply examples—there are dozens and dozens—but there is no need to do so. The point is this: anger is both proper and necessary in the face of sin. One man has said that there is no “sadder token of an utterly [destitute] moral condition than not being able to be angry with sin—and sinners.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, if a person cannot get angry about sin, it tells us that he is morally bankrupt, spiritually empty! Sin has become a matter of indifference to him, as if it were “no big deal.” A lack of anger at sin is an indication of a destitute moral condition, a desperate spiritual deadness.

When we become angry with sin, it is important that we take action against that sin. Righteous anger is never static; it always issues forth in action. In Scripture, those who had righteous anger did something positive as a result. They made an effort to resolve and put away the sin that was the cause of the anger. This is an important principle when we consider how to deal with anger: true biblical anger deals with the sin. So often our anger is directed at people instead of at the problem. It is imperative for us to channel our anger in such a way that the *cause* of the anger is dealt with biblically.

### C. The Caution Concerning Anger

Having considered the command to be angry, we now want to consider the caution concerning this anger. Our text says, “Be ye angry”—that is the command. And here is the caution: “and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil.” Righteous anger has its place, as we have seen, but righteous anger may easily pass over into *sinful* anger. This is because all of our emotions and all of our drives are subject to excesses, overindulgence, and perversions. Righteous wrath can easily become polluted with sinful elements of carnal<sup>12</sup> anger. We must avoid this.

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<sup>11</sup> Trench, *Synonyms*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> **carnal** – fleshly; sinful.

For example, it is fine to have righteous anger toward crime in your community. But a righteous anger toward crime can easily broaden into a sinful anger of vengeance when we want to retaliate personally against the sinner instead of waiting for the civil authority to deal with it. Righteous anger toward any sin, even toward sin that is against us, is appropriate, but it must never spread into vicious attacks upon the person who has sinned, whether verbal or even in thought. Time and time again, we may start out with righteous anger, but because of our lack of godly management of that anger, we end up falling into sinful anger.

### **1. Biblical illustrations**

There are many biblical illustrations of this. Numbers 20:1-13 is the classic story about Moses striking the rock when people did not believe God and were murmuring against Him. Moses was angry about these sins, and rightly so. It was a just anger, but what did he do? He smote the rock with the rod when God had told him simply to speak to it, so that he could magnify God's word (and not Moses). Moses was righteously angry, but because of his lack of self-control, his righteous anger became sinful, expressed in his striking the rock.

Jonah also was a man who was angry, and rightly so at the wickedness of the Ninevites. When God forgave them as they repented, Jonah became sinfully angry because his desire for their destruction was not fulfilled. God said to him, "Doest thou well to be angry?" (Jon 4:4). Jonah's righteous anger at their wickedness had become a sinful anger against God for forgiving them, because Jonah wanted to see God's justice pass upon them, not His mercy and grace.

The story of the elder son in the parable of the Prodigal Son is yet another pointed example, taught by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Luk 15). The prodigal son goes to a far country and wastes his father's living, consuming it in excesses, harlotry, and wickedness. Should the elder son be righteously angry about that? Yes; the younger son had been very wicked. However, when the younger son repented, and the father killed the fatted calf to joyfully receive him, the elder son became sinfully angry and would not come in to the feast. In effect, he says to his father, "I have been faithful to you, but you have never thrown a party for me. This wretch comes home and you throw a party for him!" (Luk 15:29-30). Here is an example of righteous anger in rejection of a brother's sinful lifestyle, but it passed over into unrighteous anger at his brother's restoration.

Once again we could multiply examples. It is so easy for us to begin with a righteous anger toward sin, and then fall into excesses of sinful anger. We must strongly guard against this.

### **2. Separating righteous and sinful anger**

*"Let not the sun go down on your wrath."*—Ephesians 4:26

Our passage in Ephesians also speaks of another kind of anger: "Let not the sun go down on your *wrath*" (4:26). The Greek word here for wrath is an altogether different word than the word for anger used earlier in the verse, "Be ye angry." Here it is the word *parorgismos*, which means to exasperate, to irritate, to provoke to sudden violent anger. This word speaks of an angry outburst that threatens to become lasting bitterness. This kind of anger breeds resentment, a grudge, an angry mood, an animosity. It is the kind of anger that very often occurs between a husband and a wife in arguments. It is the kind of anger that produces personal attacks against others as it lashes out with verbal attacks and name calling. It is the kind of an-



ger that suddenly arises when a discourtesy in traffic provokes road rage. That is the wrath that is spoken of here.

This kind of wrath is not to be tolerated or allowed to carry on. It is the kind of wrath that must be resolved the very same day that it occurs. Righteous anger ought to endure as long as the condition provoking it endures: “Be ye angry” is a present imperative in the Greek, telling us to be continuously angry as long as the cause of the anger exists. However, flares of temper and angry outbursts need to be resolved as soon as possible. You should certainly never let a day conclude without resolving such anger. Paul is calling us here to recognize the distinction between righteous and sinful anger. Righteous anger is a rational, deep-seated sentiment resulting from awareness and deliberation, born out of right motives, and directed toward its proper object: sin. But sinful anger is an irrational flare of emotion, an unthinking reaction to an irritating circumstance. If allowed to persist, it results in bitterness and animosity.

This is the message Paul has about such wrath: Do not let the sun go down upon it. “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath” tells us that if righteous anger becomes corrupted with a spirit of evil rage, then that very same day we must put away the corrupting evil rage which is attached to the righteous anger. Paul says in effect, “Be angry, yet in this anger of yours, allow no sinful element to enter in and to mingle with it.” Frustration, irritation, exasperation, and embitterment must be dismissed the very same day they occur, so that the righteous anger may continue without an impure element clinging to it.

On the other hand, we are to maintain righteous anger past sundown. Unless that which has provoked righteous anger has changed, our anger has no business changing or evaporating. Our righteous anger must continue as long as the cause of the anger continues. What I must put away by sundown are any ungodly or unrighteous elements in that anger, such as verbal abuse, desire for physical violence, bitterness, a hateful attitude, or a spirit of revenge.

So, in summary, we must have a strong, fixed, ongoing displeasure with sin, and this includes an antagonism toward sin that is both rational and deliberate. But, we must never allow ourselves to become so bitterly provoked and exasperated by sin that we develop a spirit of animosity, revenge, or alienation toward sinful people—and certainly we must never exert physical violence toward them.

### ***3. How we can give place to the devil with anger***

*“Neither give place to the devil.”—Ephesians 4:27*

This next verse states the reason: “Neither give place to the devil.” The devil has no originality of his own: he takes that which belongs to God, righteous anger, and perverts it into sinful anger. This is how you “give place” to the devil with reference to anger. It is when you allow your righteous anger to have attached to it these elements of sinful anger. The devil will take elements of godly anger and pervert it into a sinful expression. And if we do not guard against the perversion of that which is good, then we are giving the devil room to operate. The devil has no original ideas: anger was God’s idea, not his. The devil has to take anger and pervert it, just like he perverts sexual desire, the desire for food, and the desire for material possessions. Righteous anger is controlled, deliberate, intelligent, understanding, rational, and always directed at sin. It is not something that brings forth yelling and outbursts, violence and animosity, revenge and alienation. It is an anger that seeks to resolve the sin, not destroy the sinner.

## **D. How To Tell When Anger Is Mixed and Sinful**

### **1. *Sinful mixed with righteous anger***

Let us now answer two questions that all of us have faced. First: How do I know if I have sinful anger mixed in with my righteous anger? What are some of the signs? The signal that we have crossed over into sin is when we lose compassion toward the people involved. When I am angry at sin and then proceed also to strike out with words or actions at those involved, then I know that I have sinful anger mixed in with my righteous anger. I must use righteous anger as a motive to pursue a godly solution, bring sinful people to repentance, and draw them closer to me. But I cross the line into sin when I find myself seeking to destroy sinful people, to push them out of my life, or to get revenge against them.

When I cannot weep over Jerusalem like Christ did (Luk 13:34), then I no longer have righteous anger toward the sins of Jerusalem. I know that sinful elements are mixed in when I become self-righteous toward those with whom I am angry and start to feel superior to them. I know that sinful anger has entered in when I

- desire judgment upon them more than their salvation,
- have no heart to pray for them, and
- refuse to forgive them after they repent.

Ephesians 4:31-32 describes this kind of sinful anger: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

In other words, I know when sinful elements are mixed in with righteous anger by the way in which I deal with the problem. When I am dealing with the problem in such a way as to bring a resolution to the sin, to restore the relationship, then I know that I am dealing with unmixed righteous anger. But when I am acting in such a way as to desire these people’s harm, then I know that my righteous anger has become sin. If I seek their destruction with my *words*, verbally abusing them; or with my *body*, physically abusing them; or with my *attitudes*, mentally inwardly abusing them in my mind (even though it might not come out of my mouth)—then for sure I am one who is sinning. I must repent of those sinful elements and separate them from righteous indignation, which is just and always directed toward sin.

### **2. *The need for righteous anger***

The second question is this: How do I know if I do not have righteous anger when I should have it? The Bible commands us, “Be ye angry” against sin: if you do not have righteous anger when you are confronted with sin, then you are sinning! How do I know when I don’t have righteous anger when I should?—when I cease to be offended at sin, when I tolerate sin in my life and the lives of others, and when I stop fighting against sin. I stop fighting against sin when I stop trying to do anything to stop it, when I just shrug my shoulders and have an “oh well” type of mentality toward the sins in my own life, the lives of others, and the life of the culture. One danger we face is that we are exposed to so much sin that we are prone to get hardened toward it and stop caring about it. This is precisely why we are commanded here to be angry. Don’t stop being offended at sin!

Jeremiah 6:15 tells us,

Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the LORD.

The people of Israel could not be angry at sin or even embarrassed by it. This was a sure mark of their spiritual bankruptcy.

Psalms 97:10 commands us, “Ye that love the LORD, hate evil.” In other words, if you love the Lord, then you had better be hating the things God hates. God hates evil, and we had better be hating it also. You cannot hate something and be complacent toward it at the same time. Ephesians 4:19 tells us that the Gentiles were “past feeling”; that is, they no longer had any sensitivity or capacity for emotional reaction against the grossest excesses of sin. Everything was just taken in stride without godly reflection. Today in our media, across our news, and in our newspapers we get so much murder, adultery, fornication, theft, and general wickedness, eventually it can all seem commonplace. We can become calloused to the evil of sin by overexposure to the media. Let us beware!

In our day, many Christians are not angry enough at sin. This is a time for anger! If we lose our anger for sin, in a short while we start embracing it and justifying it. People who are morally indifferent, who cannot feel any sense of indignation and horror at sin, are people who have failed to maintain righteous anger against sin. Christ was angry when He observed sin, and we need to be too. He was angry at the hardness of people’s hearts, and we need to be angry at the hardness of hearts—of our own hearts most of all. And we need to be angry at the sins of our culture. That anger should not move us to viciously lash out against our culture, but rather to try to resolve those things that are the causes. We need to bring the gospel to bear upon people’s hearts. We need to work for the restraint of evil in God-honoring and legitimate ways.

May the Lord help us to understand righteous anger.

*Father, we thank You that You are a God Who is angry with the wicked every day.<sup>13</sup> For, Father, if You were not, You would not be a holy God, and would be Yourself unjust and unholy. What a terror that would be to us! Father, we pray that we would have Your own sober, considered, thoughtful, rational, godly anger toward sin—that we would be offended at that which offends You. Lord, we pray that we might never allow this righteous anger to be contaminated with evil expressions of anger, with flashes of wrath and irrational violence, with an ungodly response to troubling situations. Lord, one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control;<sup>14</sup> we pray that You would grant to us self-control in our anger, that it might be the anger that glorifies and honors You. We pray that You would give us the grace to respond with biblically righteous anger to things that deserve to be its objects. Preserve us, Father, from our own excesses—You know how easily we fall into them, and how the wrath of man never works the righteousness of God,<sup>15</sup> even though Your wrath does work for Your righteousness. Help us to put away all sinful anger. May we have only righteous anger, which reflects Your blessed holiness and spotless purity. We ask it in Jesus’ name and for His sake, Amen.*

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<sup>13</sup> See Psalm 7:11.

<sup>14</sup> See Galatians 5:22-23 (“self-control” is sometimes translated as “temperance”).

<sup>15</sup> See James 1:20.

## 2. Sinful Anger

### A. Review

We are commanded to have righteous anger, but we are to be careful to have no sinful element mixed in with it. If a sinful element does attach itself to the righteous anger, then it is to be forsaken and repented of as soon as possible. Righteous anger is, first of all, anger toward sin. Remember, “he that will be angry and not sin, let him be angry at nothing but sin.” Secondly, righteous anger is controlled anger. It is not an irrational flare of emotions, an impulsive reaction to an irritating situation that results in an angry outburst. It is rather an anger that is rational, deliberate, and controlled in its expression. Thirdly, righteous anger always works rationally toward a solution of the problem according to biblical principles. Righteous anger is a powerful motivating force for seeking biblical solutions through biblical methods. It moves us to address the source of the anger, which is always sin.

### B. Sinful Anger Defined

Having seen what righteous anger is and what it looks like, now we will consider what sinful anger is and how we are to avoid it. Like all human emotions, righteous anger can become sinful if it is improperly managed when it is provoked. Anger also can be sinful from the start if it is triggered by a crossing of our will.

The warning against sinful anger is found in Ephesians 4:26, “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” We are not to let the sun go down on the sinful part of our anger. We must determine, then, what is the sinful dimension of our wrath and how we are to avoid it. First we will consider a definition of anger, and then the causes of anger.

Just as righteous anger has three characteristics, so sinful anger has three characteristics. Sinful anger has a) a wrong object, b) a wrong expression, and c) a wrong solution. If any one of these three elements is present, then we are guilty of having sinful anger. Let us examine each of them in turn.

#### 1. *Wrong object*

Sinful anger has a wrong object. Righteous anger has sin as its object; as was said, “He that would be angry and not sin, let him be angry at nothing but sin.” It follows, then, that unrighteous anger has something other than sin as its object. And here is the problem: the ultimate object of sinful anger is always God Himself.

Sometimes this is expressed very directly. In our day, it is popular to say that it is permissible to be angry at God. In fact, this concept has become widely accepted as some kind of a cure for working through problems. People almost take pride in saying, “You know, I’m really angry with God about (this or that).” But this attitude and behavior is wicked in the extreme! Anger with God is the most blatant of expressions of rebellion against Him. It comes under His severest censure. In Romans 9:20 we see that, as God’s creatures, we have no right to bring God into question, let alone to be angry at Him: “Who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” We need to keep our place!

For example, Job came close to not keeping his place, and even the approach of this attitude was not tolerated by God. God asked Job, “Wilt thou *condemn* me, that thou mayest be right-

eous?” (Job 40:8). Job was frustrated about the massive calamities that had come upon him, and Job came close to accusing God of injustice for the way He was dealing with him. When God finally responded to Job in the final chapters, He identified the sin Job was involved with: “Wilt *thou* condemn me, that *thou* mayest be righteous?” This is precisely the blasphemous sin people are involved with when they are angry at God. They are claiming that they are more righteous than God is, and that God has treated them unjustly in their situation. Therefore, they are angry with God, and in this condemn Him, because He has dealt with them in this way. This is the worst kind of blasphemy! To be angry at God is to accuse God of wrongdoing; it is to accuse Him of injustice; it is to declare Him to be sinful in His conduct! No creature, much less any sinful creature, has the right to speak of God in this way. The way God dealt with Job shows us that the very approach of this attitude is intolerable to God.

Many people are not quite so bold as to declare themselves to be angry with God. They recognize the intrinsic impropriety<sup>16</sup> of so doing. Nevertheless, they are still angry with God even though it is in a veiled form. For example, we often get very angry when things do not work out according to our plans. People will not do what we want them to do, and circumstances do not unfold the way we hope they will unfold. Perhaps the job does not go the way we had hoped. At these times, we are unhappy because our expectations, goals, and desires are thwarted.

This often reveals itself in irritation or frustration with our circumstances, which we tend to excuse as being normal and acceptable reactions to the way things are going, but which are actually another expression of sinful anger. We need to mortify<sup>17</sup> our attitudes of irritation and frustration—and not excuse them or justify them as being legitimate—because they are not only wrong in themselves, they are also the first steps toward even greater expressions of sinful anger. An irritated and frustrated person is not one who possesses the peace of God, nor is he at peace with God.<sup>18</sup>

At all these times, whenever we are unhappy with our circumstances or the people in them, what we are really demonstrating is that we are angry at God’s providence.<sup>19</sup> We are angry at His management of the situation we are in. While we may think we are angry at our circumstances, we are actually angry at God, Who is managing those situations according to His purposes. We did not get what we wanted, God did not do things our way, He did not meet our desires—so we get upset. Perhaps we wanted to go camping but it rained. Perhaps we wanted to go to the store but the car broke down. Perhaps we wanted to get some sleep but the baby cried. Perhaps people are not acting the way that we want them to act. Even though their actions are not necessarily sinful, they thwarted what we hoped to achieve.

Whatever the causes may be, our anger at God’s providential dealings with our lives is really anger toward God Himself. It is asserting that God is too cruel, too weak, too dumb, or too indifferent to know how to properly manage our situations. It is declaring that He is not managing our situations wisely, and that He is not working all things together for our good (Rom

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<sup>16</sup> **intrinsic impropriety** – being improper in its very nature.

<sup>17</sup> **mortify** – put to “death” in the sense of eradicating or eliminating; utterly destroy.

<sup>18</sup> See John 14:27; Isaiah 55:12; Galatians 5:22; Romans 14:17; 15:13.

<sup>19</sup> **providence** – God’s...most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions. (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 11) See also *Providence* by Charles Spurgeon; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

8:28-29)! It proclaims that He does not know what He is doing; for if He really did know what He was doing, He would do things the way *we* want them done. Anger at God is claiming that we know better than God how our lives and our circumstances should turn out.

Thus, anger at situations or people is very often an expression of anger at God, Who controls those situations and people. They are expressions of rebellion against God's management of our lives. This anger states that we will not tolerate the way that God and His providences are dealing with us.

It is important for us to recognize that God is not the author of sin, but God *is* the author of everything else. Therefore, to be angry at anything but sin is to be angry ultimately at God Himself. We can be angry at sin while not being angry at God because God is not the author of sin. But we cannot be angry with anything else and also—at the same time, either directly or indirectly—not have anger toward God. Therefore, if the object of our anger is not sin, our anger is really toward God Himself. Thus, the nature of sinful anger is that which has a wrong object.

It is true that we see many examples of David pouring out his disappointment regarding his circumstances to God, but he never does so in a way of condemning God or being angry with God, rather in a way of seeking help in and deliverance from his circumstances. The commentator Mathew Henry says, "Although we must never complain *of* God, yet we have leave to complain *to* Him, and to be large and particular in the statement of our grievances. It is some ease to a burdened spirit to open its case to a faithful and compassionate friend. Such a friend God is, Whose ear is always open."<sup>20</sup>

## 2. *Wrong expression*

The second aspect of sinful anger is that it has a wrong expression. The expression of sinful anger may take two forms. First, it may take the form of becoming quiet and withdrawing; this is the internalization of anger. Or it may take the second form: blowing up; this is the ventilation of anger. Both of these, clamming<sup>21</sup> up and blowing up, are wrong.

### a. *Clamming up*

Consider the response of clamming up. When people are angry, they often will withdraw into a hurt, sullen silence that pouts and attempts to punish the objects of their anger by cutting off communication with them. The inward thoughts say, "You made me mad, so I'm not going to talk to you. I'm just going to walk around in sullen, hurt silence." People with this attitude are people who are tense, irritable, and miserable to be around. They silently build up grudges, resentments, and bitterness toward others. And they will not communicate in order to resolve their anger, so the anger just builds up inside.

Sometimes such people will try to justify this clamming up as being a biblical "restraint" of anger. "I don't want to explode, so I'm just going to be quiet," they say to themselves. But this is not a biblical restraint of anger because, when people clam up in this way, their intent is to hurt the objects of their anger by cutting them out of their lives and out of their communication. The expression of this says, "I'm angry with you, so I'm just going to cut you out of my

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<sup>20</sup> Henry, *Exposition on the Whole Bible*; Genesis 15:2-6. **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) was a British nonconformist minister and author, born in Wales, who spent much of his life in England. He is best known for his six-volume biblical commentary.

<sup>21</sup> **clamming up** – to withdraw and not communicate, like a clam when it closes its shell.

life; I'm not going to talk to you. I'm going to ignore you and treat you like you don't exist!" Therefore, clamming up is not a biblical restraint of anger. Its intent is to hurt others by cutting them out of our lives and communication. It is also a form of response that is full of self-pity and self-justification: "I didn't get treated right, so I'm going to pout!"

Sometimes this clamming up is not obvious. People might continue to maintain an outer layer of politeness and civility. They will talk, but nevertheless they are boiling inside. But this kind of clamming up will ultimately show itself in the second way of responding wrongly to anger: sooner or later it leads to blowing up!

Proverbs 26:23-26 speaks of those who internalize anger and clam up:

"Burning lips and a wicked heart are like a potsherd<sup>22</sup> covered with silver dross." The silver is an outer layer that masks what is actually there. A potsherd covered with silver is an effort to hide what is really going on inside.

"He that hateth dissembleth [i.e., lies] with his lips, and layeth up deceit within him," meaning that he is not being honest with how he really feels inside.

"When he speaketh fair, believe him not: for there are seven abominations in his heart. Whose hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness shall be shewed before the whole congregation."

What the passage is saying is that those who clam up and internalize their anger—even though they may maintain a layer of nicety on the outside—ultimately will explode. It may take many months or even years. But we have all heard of situations where someone who was thought to be a nice person takes a gun, goes to the workplace, and shoots people. Then everyone remarks that they never would have thought he could have done such a thing. What had this person been doing? He had been internalizing anger until finally it exploded.

#### *b. Blowing up*

It is always wrong to indulge yourself in an outburst. People who wrongly express anger this way often do not make any attempt to quiet themselves or internalize their anger. These people often yell, scream, stomp around, throw things, and resort to verbal and physical violence when they are angry. This pattern of behavior is also a means of striking out at the objects of their anger. In fact, it is an effort to inflict injuries upon others, and often it is an expression of an inward desire to destroy them! This is the reason Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount,

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment (Mat 5:21-22).

Jesus' point is that sinful anger, when it is expressed sinfully, is an initial stage of murder! The yelling, screaming, verbal and physical violence, stomping around, and throwing things are really the first steps to killing the object of anger. Very few of us will actually carry it that far, but Jesus says that the *intent of the heart* is sin as much as the actual commission of the act itself. This is why anger and murder are so closely connected together in the Scripture: they are in the same family of sins. The one can and will inevitably lead to the other if it is not controlled and contained.

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<sup>22</sup> **potsherd** – scrap of broken clay pottery; by extension, something of little value.

In Genesis 49:5-7, Jacob has called his sons to announce his blessings and predictions upon them. In verse 5 he speaks about Simeon and Levi. He says,

Simeon and Levi are brethren...*instruments of cruelty* are in their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

Simeon and Levi had reason to be angry. Their sister had been defiled. But they handled it in a very sinful way, murdering men after they tricked them into trusting them with a sacred vow (Gen 34). Jacob condemns them in no uncertain terms, and he declares that the cause of this sin was uncontrolled anger. Thus he says, “cursed be [such] anger.”

So, both of these expressions, clamming up and blowing up, are *sinful expressions* of anger. They are the ones that we commonly see. People will either cut themselves off from others by silence, or they will begin to use their tongues in an uncontrolled fashion to attack and destroy others.

### **3. Wrong solution**

Sinful anger not only has a wrong object and a wrong expression, but it pursues a wrong solution, the third mark of sinful anger. *Righteous anger* seeks to address the cause of the anger, sin, in a calm and rational manner through the application of biblical principles. One example is the process of Matthew 18:15-17.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

This is a rational, controlled, biblical response to sin.

However, *sinful anger* does not address or deal with the cause of anger according to biblical principles. When provoked, a person guilty of sinful anger does not pause to ask, “Did he sin against me? Do I have a right to be angry in the first place?” If someone has done something to make you angry, and there is no sin on their part (or when there is sin, your anger is not directed at the sin itself), then you need to repent of your anger toward that person.

But the person who is sinfully angry does not go through this process. He does not ask a) if it was sin that provoked him to anger or b) whether he has the right to be angry in the first place. If he does have the right to be angry because sin is present, he does not ask himself if he is expressing it in a controlled and rational fashion. The person controlled by sinful anger does not pause to seek a biblical method for addressing the sin that was committed against him. He does not pause to seek the most God-honoring way to resolve the situation. Instead, he attempts to resolve the situation by using sinful anger to try to scare and intimidate the other person into doing what he wants. By expressing anger toward others, the one with sinful anger tries to exercise power over them to control them. If they do not do what he wants, then he will try to force them to do so through punishing them with his anger. By making them fear the sinful expression of his anger—his clamming up or his blowing up—he manipulates them into doing what he wants. He has no respect for the biblical principles he tramples in the pro-



cess. The person who uses his anger in this manner may be able to get his way, but he does so at the cost of destroying relationships. Sinful anger may and often does achieve a momentary victory; in other words, the sinful person may get his way. But it leaves behind a trail of destruction, fear, wounded spirits, and broken relationships.

And more, sinful anger never really fixes anything; it never really solves the causes of the anger in the first place. It merely makes the situation worse, which then provokes more anger, which makes the situation even worse, which provokes still more anger—until the relationship is totally destroyed. For instance, a husband might blow up when his wife did not do what he wanted her to do. What does this accomplish? Instead of resolving the cause of his anger, he merely manipulated her with fear. And because the underlying cause of the behavior is never addressed, his wife never changes. So is it any surprise that this happens again and again? Thus, while sinful anger may win an occasional advantage, it always loses the war. People who use sinful anger to try to achieve their goals only drive the accomplishment of those goals further away. Anger may give them a sense of coping with a situation, and power and superiority over others, and even a degree of triumph over others for a brief period of time. But in the end, they are despised and rejected by all. They find themselves utterly alone, because no one wants to be around an angry person. They lose the very power that they sought to exercise over people.

So, sinful anger has at least one of these three elements: wrong object, wrong expression, or wrong solution. Often it has all three, but it always has at least one of these three elements. We can be righteously angry at sin but express it wrongly. Or we can be righteously angry at sin and express it properly, but seek entirely unbiblical solutions. Thus sinful anger always has at least one of these elements. It will have a *wrong object*: we will be angry at something other than sin. Or it will have a *wrong expression*: we will either clam up or blow up instead of dealing in a controlled, rational manner by means of biblical communication. Or it will have a *wrong solution*: we will attack and manipulate people instead of attacking and resolving problems.

### C. Important Questions

Any time you become angry, examine yourself with these questions.

1. Why am I angry? Am I angry at sin, or am I really, behind everything else, angry at God because He did not work things out or cause people to do what I really wanted?

2. How am I expressing this anger? Am I clamming up or blowing up, or am I expressing it in a controlled, rational fashion using biblical communication? This does not mean that we cannot be agitated. We can be very agitated at sin and yet control our tongues to communicate in an honest, fair, straight-forward manner.

3. How am I resolving my anger? If the source of my anger is sin, then am I addressing the sin biblically and trying to resolve it? If the object of my anger is really God, then I must resolve it by first repenting of the sin, and then developing an attitude of submission, learning, and contentment toward the providential dealings of God in my life.

This, then, is how we begin to analyze and to manage our anger. May the Lord help us to adequately and properly assess our anger, to see where it is right and where it is wrong, and to manage it for the glory of God and the blessing of His people.

### 3. The Cure for Sinful Anger

#### A. Introduction

We have seen that anger, in and of itself, is not sinful if it meets three criteria. Anger is not sinful if it has a right object, which is sin; if it has a right expression, one that is rational and controlled; and if it has a right resolution, using biblical methods to resolve the cause of the anger. This kind of anger is righteous, not sinful. Indeed, the Scripture itself commands us to have righteous anger: “Be ye angry, and sin not” (Eph 4:26). Furthermore, to fail to be angry at sin is to fail to be like God.

However, as we have seen, there is a sinful anger, and the vast majority of biblical references are to this kind of anger. Sinful anger has a wrong object, which is God. It has a wrong expression, either clamming up to internalize anger or blowing up in uncontrolled verbal or physical violence. It also has a wrong solution, which violates biblical principles in an effort to hurt the one who offended.

Having seen the definition of sinful anger, now we need to consider what the Bible says about its cure. Any competent doctor knows full well that before a remedy for a disease can be prescribed, he must identify the cause of the problem *and* understand its seriousness. If the cause of the problem is not properly identified, then a wrong remedy is going to be given. If the seriousness of the problem is not understood, then the patient may not bother to use the remedy. He will not see the danger, so he will not respond to the cure that is being offered. Thus, when the cause of anger is identified and its seriousness understood, then the remedy for anger will be seen both as proper and necessary. So now we will consider the cause of anger, its seriousness, and its cure.

#### B. Its Cause: Pride

The cause of sinful anger is neither complex nor obscure. In fact, it is so simple that it could be summarized in one word: pride. Time and again, the characteristic of pride is seen to be the cause of sinful anger. Notice the association between pride and wrath in the Scriptures. Proverbs 21:24 tells us, “Proud and haughty scorner is his name, who dealeth in *proud wrath*”—there is an intimate link between the two. In Jeremiah 48:29-30, God says,

We have heard the pride of Moab, (he is exceeding proud) his loftiness, and his arrogancy, and his pride, and the haughtiness of his heart. I know his wrath, saith the LORD.

In other words, when God looked at Moab as a nation and saw its pride, arrogance, and haughtiness, He said, “I also see his wrath.” There is a strong connection between pride and wrath.

*Naaman the Syrian* was struck with leprosy. His little servant girl was a captured Israelite. She said to him, “Go to the land of my fathers. There is a prophet there, and he will heal you of your leprosy.” Thus Naaman went to Elisha the prophet and asked him to cure his leprosy. Remember that Naaman was a great man in his kingdom. He was accustomed to things being done with due circumstance, pomp, and ceremony. When he came to Elisha, 2 Kings 5:10 tells us that Elisha sent a messenger to him saying, “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” Naaman’s reaction is recorded in the following verse:

But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

Naaman's rage was the result of his offended pride! It is as if he had said:

Go wash in the dirty Jordan river? Ha! That's beneath a man of my dignity. He should have come out and, with due pomp and ceremony, he should have stood before me and put his hand over the place. That would have been a healing worthy of my status, position, and stature. But to go lower myself, descend off my chariot, and go down to the Jordan river? No!

This all was an offense to his pride. His anger resulted from his pride being offended, offended by things not happening the way he thought they ought for a man in his position. (Thankfully, he recovered from his pride and anger, went down to the Jordan, washed himself—and God in mercy cleansed him.)

In the book of Esther, *Haman* also experienced an offence to his pride. Esther 3:5 tells us, "And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath." King Ahasuerus had commanded all people to offer Haman worship. They were not only to bow down to him, they were to do him reverence. Mordecai was a Jew, however. He only would bow down and do reverence to one being, Almighty God—for the first commandment says, "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me." And the second commandment gives reference to idols, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself nor worship them, for I am the Lord thy God" (Exo 20:3, 5). Mordecai could not obey God and the king at the same time, so he refused to extend this act of worship to Haman. "When Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not...then [he] was full of wrath"—once again we see that anger is a result of offended pride. Haman thought, "My station, my position, my sovereignty<sup>23</sup> as second in the kingdom is not being duly acknowledged." Consequently, he sought to put all the Jews to death.<sup>24</sup> But God turned the tables on him: he was hung on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

*Nebuchadnezzar* also is an example in Daniel 3:13-19. He set up a large golden image, which many think was an image of himself. He wanted a religion to unite his kingdom that revolved around the worship of himself. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow down to worship the golden image, the Bible tells us that Nebuchadnezzar became filled with rage. In fury, he had the three Hebrews cast into a fiery furnace. The Lord Jesus Christ met with them there and delivered them from certain death. Nebuchadnezzar's pride was involved because he, as king, had issued a decree that they did not obey, for they chose not to worship a god other than the one true God.

*In the New Testament*, we see this same connection between pride and wrath. Jesus was preaching in the synagogues of Israel in the town of Nazareth. He says in Luke 4:25-28,

But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them

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<sup>23</sup> **sovereignty** – supreme authority.

<sup>24</sup> Some scholars believe Haman was an Amalekite and descendent of Agag their king; hence he may have had vengeful anger toward Jews for God's destruction of his people (Est 3:1; 1Sa 2-3, 32-33).

was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian. And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath.

Why were these people so angry? It was because the Lord Jesus was bringing out the fact that during these two times of crisis in Israel, God made a point of ministering to the Gentiles. The widow of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian were Gentiles, not Jews. Jesus is pointing out that during this time of Israel's history, because Israel was in rebellion against God, God did not minister to the Jewish people. Instead, He ministered to the Gentiles as a precursor of what would happen to national Israel subsequent to Jesus' death and resurrection. Israel as a nation would be rejected, and the gospel would go out freely to the Gentiles. This offended Jewish national pride. They were so angry at this offense to their pride as God's special people, that they were ready to murder our Lord!

This is only a brief sampling of passages, but they demonstrate that pride time and again is connected to wrath, provokes wrath, and is the source of wrath. From Romans 12:3, pride can be defined simply as an inordinate self-esteem in which one thinks more highly of himself than he ought to think, with the result that he views both God and his fellow man with contempt and indifference. Pride is simply conceit, a dominating self-importance that arises out of a sense of personal sovereignty, autonomy,<sup>25</sup> and importance. The prideful person believes that everyone and everything is in place to serve him. He believes that their failure to do so is a crime against his rights, and therefore it arouses his wrath. The reason people get angry is because they think they deserve better treatment. They think they are special. They have an exalted view of self-importance which believes that everyone and everything is in place to please and serve *them*. When others do not please and serve them, then they become angry about it. Their privileges and desires were not served properly, according to their expectations, by those around them.

This is the reason that sinful anger is actually anger against God. We are angry that God has dared to exalt His sovereignty over ours. There can only be one sovereign in the universe. Man exalts himself in pride to try to become sovereign, but God in His sovereignty thwarts that desire. The thwarting of a man's desire fills him with wrath, and that wrath is directed toward the ones who deprived him of what he was attempting to achieve. Thus, when we are angry at people because they did not do what we wanted them to do, when we are angry at situations because our expectations were not fulfilled, when we are angry because we did not get our way—then that anger is really anger with God, because God is in control of all people and all situations.

Therefore, the cause of sinful anger is pride. It is the exalting of ourselves and our will against the sovereignty and will of God. If Haman would have realized that God alone is to be worshipped, then he would not have been angry at Mordecai for refusing to worship him. However, Haman was really in competition with God to receive worship, as was Nebuchadnezzar, as was Naaman, as were the people of Nazareth who thought that they were better than non-Jews. When God chose to favor another people, they in essence were saying, "God, You cannot do that. It is not right. We won't tolerate it. We'll throw anyone who says that to his death off the brow of the hill." In every instance, it was a violation of man's sense of sovereignty and self-exaltation that provoked sinful anger. It was a violation of man's sense of im-

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<sup>25</sup> **autonomy** – independence.

portance and perceived right to be served by others that brought about the expression of wrath. Pride, then, is the cause of sinful anger.

### **C. Its Seriousness: Destruction**

Secondly, we need to recognize the seriousness of sinful anger. Many people say something like this: “Well, so what? Everyone gets a little frustrated now and then. Who doesn’t?” or “Yes, I blow my top from time to time, but what’s the big deal? It’s not so serious, is it?” In fact, it is serious. It is a big deal, because God is displeased with all sin in His people and sinful anger in particular. This is why He commands us to “sin not” in our anger, and to put away sinful wrath (Eph 4:31). As believers in Christ we praise God for salvation from God’s wrath because of our redemption in Christ (Rom 5:9), yet our sins do displease God and bring His chastening hand upon us (1Co 11:30; Heb 12:7).

The seriousness of sinful anger is shown in its destructiveness; it is incredibly destructive and evil. The sad thing is that the angry person is often the last one to see this.

#### **1. Reputation**

First, sinful anger is destructive of one’s own reputation. Ecclesiastes 7:9 says, “Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools”—a person who is sinfully angry is a person who can be categorized as a fool. Proverbs 14:17 tells us, “He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly: and a man of wicked devices is hated.” Hasty anger is sinful anger, and sinful anger labels one as very foolish in the eyes of others. This is because, as we will see, it is understanding that enables a man to defer his anger. Those who lack this wisdom are those who give in to anger. Therefore, if we have any concern for our reputation in the eyes of others, if we have any concern for not being labeled a fool, then we need to be people who are slow to wrath. We need to be people who rule our spirits, because “he that ruleth his spirit [is better] than he that taketh a city” (Pro 16:32).

#### **2. Relationships**

Secondly, anger is destructive of relationships. The angry person is miserable to live with. Anger destroys marriages. Proverbs 21:19 tells us, “It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman [or man].” The gender here is irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that it is miserable to live with an angry person. It is better to live in the most difficult of conditions out in the wilderness, than to live in the most pleasant of conditions with an angry person.

Proverbs 27:3 says, “A stone is heavy, and the sand weighty; but a fool’s wrath is heavier than them both.” When I was a Boy Scout, I went on a campout. We backpacked all of our gear and went into a canyon. Some of the guys hiked to the top of a hill, opened their packs, and found—rocks! Someone had put rocks into the packs, and the guys had carried that heavy weight—ten, fifteen, twenty pounds more than they needed to carry—to the top of the hill. It was a weighty burden they had to carry. A fool’s wrath is also a heavy burden to bear. When someone lives with an angry person, he labors under a load that is far worse than carrying a backpack full of rocks.

Proverbs 27:4 tells us, “Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?” To live with an outrageous and cruel person who is constantly weighing down those in his household with his anger, is a miserable state of affairs. Anger destroys marriages, and it destroys children. Ephesians 6:4 says, “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to

wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” When we by our unjust behavior cause a just anger to rise up in our children, it causes alienation between parent and child; it destroys that relationship. Wrath also destroys friendships: no one wants to be around an angry person. Proverbs 29:22 says that angry people do not have friends because they are always full of argumentation. They are always a source of transgression and sin in the relationship.

The reason no one wants to be around an angry person is because people realize that anger is really a spirit of murder! In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus tells us,

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Why?—because it is anger that leads to murder, just like the lustful look leads to adultery. If carried out to its ultimate extreme, it eventually results in the destruction of the object of the anger. Is not this what Haman tried to do to Mordecai? Is not this what the Jews tried to do to Jesus when they took him to the brow of the hill to cast Him headlong? They wanted to kill Him! Is not this what Nebuchadnezzar attempted to do to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when he tossed them into the fiery furnace? Anger leads to murder because sinful anger wants to destroy its object. Anger is serious because, if left unchecked, it can lead anyone, including each one of us, to the sin of murder. In the eyes of God, we are guilty as soon as sinful anger arises in our hearts. Anger destroys relationships.

### **3. Service**

Anger is not only serious because it is destructive of reputation and relationships, but thirdly, it is destructive of service to God. If we ever hope to serve God, we cannot be angry people. The Bible says specifically that one who desires to be an elder must not be soon angry. James 1:19-20 says, “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” In other words, if we desire to advance the cause of the kingdom of God, we cannot do so through anger.

1 Timothy 2:8 tells us, “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, *without wrath and doubting.*” We cannot lead or even enter into congregational prayer if we are in a state of unbelief, doubting the promises of God, goodness of God, and willingness of God to answer prayer. Nor can we enter into prayer if we are angry people. If one has anger toward someone else in the congregation, it is not suitable for him to be leading that congregation in prayer. A man cannot wrestle with God and his neighbor at the same time. Moses lost the opportunity to serve God in the Promised Land because of his wrath. In Psalm 106:32-33 we read, “They angered him also at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moses for their sakes: Because they provoked his spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips.” It was out of a provocation of spirit and anger that Moses struck the rock when God told him only to speak to it (Num 20:7-8, 11-12). As a result, he was not able to serve God in the Promised Land.

#### **4. Growth and life**

Finally, sinful anger is destructive of spiritual growth and life. Proverbs 19:19 says, “A man of great wrath shall suffer punishment [i.e., chastening]: for if thou deliver him, yet thou must do it again.” A person who does not resolve his problem of anger is constantly undergoing chastisement from God. He is a person who is constantly full of difficulty and problems. He makes the same mistakes over and over again. If you deliver him, you have to keep on delivering him. As soon as you bail him out of one situation that his anger got him into, he sinks right back into another.

Proverbs 25:28 states, “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.” In olden days, cities had walls around them to protect them from marauders and invading armies. A strong wall could resist all kinds of attacks. In the same way, we as Christians are under constant attack from the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Bible says specifically that if we have no rule over our own spirit, then we are like a city without walls. In other words, we are wide open to be attacked on every hand; we are defenseless against attack if we will not rule our spirit. The ultimate conclusion of anger is destruction of growth and life, as in Job 5:2, “wrath killeth the foolish man.” In other words, wrath is not only destructive of others, ultimately it is destructive of ourselves! How many times have we heard of angry people dying of ulcers, heart attacks, or doing something foolish in anger: driving too fast, using a weapon, taking alcohol or drugs, etc.

Therefore, anger is a big deal; it is serious. Anger is destructive of our reputation and relationships both at home and with friends; it leads us into a spirit of murder. Anger is destructive of our service to God; an angry person will never be able to do anything in the service of God. Sinful anger is destructive of our growth and of our very lives themselves.

#### **D. Its Remedy: Understanding**

Having seen sinful anger’s cause (pride) and its seriousness (destructiveness), we can now consider its remedy. Proverbs 14:29 tells us, “He that is slow to wrath is of *great understanding*; but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.” The remedy for anger is great understanding of God. The more one understands about God and about himself, the slower he will be to anger. Thus the measure of the control of our anger is the measure of our wisdom: the more control, the greater our wisdom. Where does anger rest?—in the bosom of fools (Ecc 7:9)! It does not rest in the bosom of a wise man. Proverbs 19:11 says, “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” Great understanding is connected to a person who is slow to wrath; understanding causes a man to defer his anger.<sup>26</sup>

##### **1. Pride, sovereignty, and self-will**

If we would conquer anger, there are some biblical truths we must understand. One of these is pride; until we deal with our pride, we will never deal with our anger. Many people pray about their anger, they repent from their anger, they are grieved over their anger, but they see little success and progress in conquering anger. Why is this? The answer is because they have never struck at the root of the tree. Their anger is like a maple tree. You can cut

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<sup>26</sup> As noted at the beginning of the booklet, the author presupposes the reader is living a genuine Christian life characterized by faith in Christ and daily repentance of sin. These exhortations for the remedy of sinful anger will be ineffective and frustrating for someone who has not experienced the saving and transforming grace of God in Christ.

down a maple tree, but the stump sprouts back. You can cut it down again and again, but it just sprouts back again. Until you dig up all the roots, it is going to keep coming back. Likewise, we can attack our anger; but until we chop out the roots of pride in our lives, the anger is just going to keep coming back again and again.

We must deal with our pride because pride is the cause of sinful anger. Pride is the exaltation of ourselves, the insistence of personal sovereignty and independence from God, with an accompanying attitude that people and circumstances exist to serve us and our needs. This leads us to become upset when things do not work out as we expect. The first step in gaining control over sinful anger is understanding that we must give up our false notion of independence from God and our willful pride.

This notion that we have a right to certain outcomes and conditions in our lives is the cause of much of our sinful anger. James speaks of dealing with our false notion of independence from God and our willful pride. James 4:13-14 says,

Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

James attacks the self-importance of man. He asks, "What is your life?" Is it something exalted and important and eternal? No, he says it is like the vapor that comes out of a steam kettle. Watch something boiling on the stove and see the steam rising up and disappearing; and think, "That's me, a vapor." This recognition helps us to realize our proper place: we are finite creatures, dependent upon God. James goes on to say,

For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your *boastings*: all such rejoicing is evil (4:15).

He is addressing Christians that have this pride of personal sovereignty and self-will. They say in effect,

I'm going to do this; I'm going to do that. I'm going to achieve this; my goals and plans are all going to work out.

But James replies in effect,

Wait a minute. What you need to realize is that there is one Sovereign in the universe, and you need to be subject to His will when you make your plans. He is the One that sits on the throne, and you are but a vapor. If He chooses to change your plans and give you outcomes that you did not look for, then your attitude needs to be, "not my will, but thine be done" (Luk 22:42).

The solution to sinful anger is to submit to God's sovereign will. Having done this we will be content<sup>27</sup> with whatever God brings to pass. Anger comes from rebellion against the sovereignty of God. It is an attitude that says, "I will not tolerate the way God in His providence is dealing with this situation." Instead, we must have the attitude of Job, who thought, "The Lord is in control of this; blessed be the name of the Lord. No matter what the Lord brings to pass, blessed be His name" (Job 1:21, paraphrased). Job had sorrow, but he recognized that God has

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<sup>27</sup> See *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* by Jeremiah Burroughs (1599-1646), available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.



the right to do whatever He wants. People often get angry at God because of the circumstances He has brought into their lives. However, God has authority over the clay to do with all His vessels what He pleases. He may choose to deliver a vessel, or He may choose to bring that vessel into distress (Rom 9:21). To be angry at God is to say to God, “*My* will be done, not Thine.”

## **2. *The treatment we receive***

Secondly, we must recognize that the worst treatment we receive is better than we deserve. A person who sees himself as he truly is, not only as a creature of God but also as a sinful creature, does not get angry because he does not have better. Instead, he is amazed that he has as much as he does. This is the attitude of Jacob in Genesis 32:10:

I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.

He recognized that God had dealt well with him. He looked at God’s dealings with him and said, in effect,

I didn’t deserve this; I’m not worthy of this. I’m not worthy of the least of Thy mercies. Oh, dear God, You have no reason to relieve me from my distresses, except that You are a gracious God.

Jacob recognized that he and all of us deserve death and hell. Any treatment we receive that is better than death and hell is better than we deserve. It is a cause for thankfulness, not a cause for anger.

Maybe you have a difficult financial, marriage, or health situation—or perhaps other difficulties. Whatever your difficulties are, they are not nearly as bad as what we each deserve. We are all in the same boat together, and what we deserve is to be sent to hell for our sins. If God has graciously given His only Son, so that whosoever believes in Him “should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Joh 3:16)—if we have that, beloved, we are rich! We have more than we deserve; we ought to be filled with joy, thanksgiving, and rejoicing. It simply does not matter how many of our trivial plans do not work out.

And even more, true Christians have a great eternal destiny freely given to them: they are going to heaven, they are going to be with God. Why do we get so upset about the bumps in the road along the way? The smooth and wide road leads to hell! “Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction...strait<sup>28</sup> is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life” (Mat 7:13-14).

## **3. *Our own treatment of God***

Thirdly, we must remind ourselves that we have treated God far worse than we are presently being treated. Whenever we become upset at our mistreatment, we need to ask ourselves, “Who am I to get angry with other people for the way they treat me, when I have treated God far worse than they have ever thought about treating me?” Others’ provocations of us should move us not to anger, but to shame and confession at the remembrance of our provocations against God.

For example, husbands, suppose your wife does not treat you just right. Suppose she does not respond to you in the way you would like. Ask yourself this question:

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<sup>28</sup> **strait** – narrow, tight.

Have I, as the bride of Jesus Christ, responded just right to Him every time? Am I not just reaping what I've sown (Gal 6:7-8), and even far less than what I've sown? When I think of how I've treated Christ—my acts of unfaithfulness to Him, my insensitivities, my indifferences, my neglect, and my lack of wrapping my life around Him completely—how can I be upset with my wife when I think she has not done perfectly by me.

Likewise, when others start to provoke you to anger, think about the fact that God has a lot more reason to be angry with you than you do with them; remember that God has been patient, merciful, and slow to anger with you—how can you not be slow to anger with another?

#### ***4. Submitting to God's rule***

The fourth part of the remedy for sinful anger is that we must submit to God's judgment about what is best for us. Romans 8:28 tells us, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." If you are a Christian, you believe that this verse is true. Now, if it is true *and* we are angry about what God does in our lives, then what we are really saying is that our idea about what is good for us is better than God's idea about what is good for us.

This gets us back once again to the issues of pride, autonomy, and rebellion against God's sovereignty. Whatever God in His sovereignty and wisdom deems to be good for us, happens in our lives. When we get angry over it, then what we are declaring is that it is not good. We are saying to God, "God, You don't know what You're doing! Your promises aren't true, and You're not good!" This may seem harsh, but it is exactly what we are declaring when we get angry at God. Anger fades away when we believe by faith that this provoking circumstance or person is a tool in the hand of God to do us good, according to His good and wise purposes. How can you be angry when God is doing you good? If this provoking circumstance is not being used by Him for your good, then Romans 8:28 is not true. If that is the case, you better just throw your Bible away and stop being a Christian! If the verse is true, on the other hand, then you need to give up your anger, believe in the promises of God, and behave in a manner consistent with their truths.

#### ***5. Summary***

The remedy for sinful anger is to gain understanding. Understanding these four truths goes a long way toward putting away anger.

1. We are not as important or in control as we think. We must give up self-will and submit to God's sovereign will if we are to overcome anger. We need to attack our pride at its roots.
2. The worst treatment we receive is better than we deserve.
3. We have treated God far worse than we are presently being treated.
4. We must submit to God's judgment about what is best for us.

A person that understands these four points is slow to anger because it takes a long time to think through them. As he thinks through these things, then the anger is put off (Eph 4:22-24). In fact, it never does come because the consideration of these things takes it away. This is why the Bible says, "Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools" (Ecc 7:9). A wise man understands these things.

May the Lord help us to repent of our sin of pride in order that we might resolve and conquer our sin of anger.

## 4. Resolving Our Anger

### A. Introduction

We have considered sinful anger's cause, seriousness, and cure. The *cause* of sinful anger can be summarized in one word: pride. When we have a self-importance that believes that everything and everyone is in place to serve us and accomplish our wills, then we become angry when we are disappointed. The proud man is the one who thinks that he has the right to have things go his way—and he becomes angry when they do not. The *seriousness* of sinful anger stems from the fact that it is a great sin against God and is extremely destructive. It is not something that we may excuse or accommodate as if it were insignificant. We saw that it is destructive of reputation, relationships, ministry, spiritual growth, and life itself.

We saw the *cure* for sinful anger in Proverbs 19:11: the understanding of a man defers his anger. To overcome sinful anger we must give up personal sovereignty and self-will. We must give up the idea that we have the right to certain outcomes and conditions in our lives. We will defer our sinful anger only when we understand what is important:

- God's will is being achieved, even when ours is not;
- God is working together all events for good, even though the events themselves may seem "bad" to us at the moment;
- Our worst circumstances are better than what we deserve;
- We have treated God far worse than we are being treated.

As we come to an understanding of these things, the root of sinful anger (pride) is overcome.

Now we need to explore further how to deal with the issue of anger. It is an essential mark of spiritual maturity to delay anger and deal with it righteously. The Bible tells us in Titus 1:7 that a church officer who is qualified to lead the people of God must not be "soon angry." Those who are put in positions of leadership should be only those who are mature, and one of the marks of maturity is the ability to delay anger and deal with it righteously. Proverbs 16:32 says, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." Thus, it is a mark of spiritual maturity and strength for one to deal responsibly with the issue of anger.

### B. Purpose and Value of Anger

How can we deal with anger in a mature fashion? What constitutes a mature response to anger? In order to answer, we must recognize the purpose and value of anger. As we have seen, anger is a God-given emotion. This is important to understand. It is an emotion that God Himself possesses, and one that He has given us the capacity for as well. God always has a reason for what He does, and He gave us this emotion of anger for a reason. We should not be wishing we didn't have it. This God-given capacity for anger is not to be ignored or eradicated; instead, it is to be understood. We must realize that anger is like pain. Pain has a very important but temporary function in our lives: to reveal the existence of a problem and to moti-

vate us to fix that problem. That is why God gives us the capacity for pain. Pain helps us; we should thank God for the capacity for pain. In the same way, God has given us anger to indicate to us that there is a problem and to motivate us to solve that problem.

Anger, like pain, is not meant to be ignored, nor is it meant to last forever. It is to have an important but temporary role in our lives. It is meant to be responded to and resolved. We would think someone unwise if he ignored his physical pain, voluntarily living in it for years when solutions were available. This is precisely what people do when they suppress their anger as if it did not exist, or when they live for years with unresolved anger. Anger, like pain, is not meant to be suppressed, unresolved, or ignored; it is not meant to last forever. Just as pain is the warning system of the body, telling us that something is physically wrong and needs to be fixed, so anger is the pain messenger of the soul, telling us that something is morally wrong and needs to be fixed. We have nerves in our bodies that sense pain. These ordinarily lie silent; but when something causes pain, they immediately leap into action to send messages that something needs to be done—right now! In the same way, anger is an emotion that is to lie dormant within us until something morally wrong awakens it, causing it to come to life. Just as pain is not always there but can suddenly spring up when poked by something sharp, in the same way anger is not always to be there, but it should suddenly spring up when something morally wrong pokes the soul. When anger does come to life, like pain, then we must discover the cause and the remedy for it.

So the purpose and value of anger is that it is the warning system of the soul telling us that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. It is not to be there all the time, but it is to leap into action when there is something wrong. Consequently, we need to see anger as a valuable warning system that awakens us to moral danger.

### **C. The Need to Identify the Cause of Our Anger**

Secondly, after we recognize the purpose and value of anger, we must squarely face the cause of our anger if we are to manage it maturely. When we experience pain in our bodies, immediately we try to discover the cause of that pain in order to deal with it. If we discover that the cause of the pain is that our fingers are on a hot stove, we pull our fingers away. If we find that the cause of our pain is a child standing on our toe, we move the child. Whatever the case, we must discover the cause of the pain if we are going to resolve it. In the same way, we must discover the cause of our anger if we are going to deal maturely with what is provoking it.

As we have seen, there are two types of anger: righteous anger and sinful anger. First, righteous anger is anger directed at sin. This is the kind of anger that God has, and sin is always the object of His anger. We, also, are commanded to be angry at sin. Secondly, there is sinful anger. Sinful anger is anger at not getting our way or what we think we deserve. Fundamentally, it is anger at the violation of our sense of personal control or sovereignty. Our wills and desires were thwarted by people or circumstances, which are ultimately under the control of God. Consequently, when we become angry at people and circumstances, we are really becoming angry at God. Ultimately, sinful anger is anger at God's management of the providential circumstances in our lives. It is anger that His will has prevailed over our own wills in the way that He has managed people and situations in our lives.

Before any progress can be made in overcoming anger, we must determine its cause. If the cause of our anger is someone else's sin, then we must deal with that in an appropriate way. If the cause of our anger is our own sin, then we must deal with that as well. Now, like pain, anger does not occur without provocation. Anger always has a source; it always has a history behind it. We must ask ourselves: Why did I get angry? What was the cause? Is it sinful or righteous anger? This is the very first step in dealing maturely with our anger because the answer will indicate how we are to resolve it. When we admit that we are angry, when we try to see its causes, when we have a proper perspective on it in order to deal with it—then we are taking a mature approach to resolving the anger. We are then responding to it in a constructive fashion.

## **D. Resolving Righteous Anger**

In order to deal maturely with anger, we must first recognize the purpose and value of anger and, secondly, discover and face the cause of anger. Thirdly, we are now ready to implement biblical procedures for the resolution of anger. There are two procedures to follow corresponding to the two types of anger we may have. If we have righteous anger, there is one set of procedures to follow; and if we have sinful anger, then there is another set.

First, consider the procedure if our anger is directed at sin, a righteous anger. We want to follow a biblical procedure for resolving an injustice when it is caused by sinful behavior. If someone is poking us with a needle causing pain, we get the pain to stop by getting the person to stop poking. Similarly, if someone is sinning against us and causing anger, then the solution is to get that person to stop sinning against us. This resolves the anger because it addresses the moral problem that is provoking the anger. If we are going to address the sin of another that is provoking righteous anger in us, then we must try to resolve the problem according to biblical procedures.

### **1. Personal level**

The first step in the biblical procedure is to attempt to resolve the problem at the personal level. Luke 17:3-4 tells us,

Take heed to yourselves [that is, proceed with care]: If thy brother trespass against thee, *re-buke him*, and if he repent *forgive him*. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

When someone is angering us by their bad conduct, the Bible commands us to take heed to ourselves; that is, we need to be very careful in how we react.

We first must clarify that our understanding of the facts is correct, and then we keep the issue strictly between ourselves and the other person. The entire matter may be cleared by his explaining to you his side of the story. Therefore, it is important that you keep the matter private and listen to him.

But when our understanding of the situation proves correct and there is actual biblical sin against us, then we are to bring that sin directly and personally to their attention. The passage tells us to “rebuke” the sinner. We are to say to that person, “You are sinning against me. That is wrong, and it needs to stop.” If the person repents, we are to forgive him. Forgiveness in the face of repentance is the resolution of the anger.

Once the person stops sinning against us, if we continue to be angry at him, then it is a manifestation that we have not forgiven him. It demonstrates that we have not dealt in a bibli-

cal and mature fashion with our anger. If someone were poking us with a pin, but he stopped when we asked him to, we cannot continue to blame him for our pain. We need to acknowledge that the provocation has stopped, and we need to give up our anger when he repents of his sin against us.

## **2. Involving authority**

We first should try to resolve righteous anger at the personal level; but if the problem cannot be settled there, then, secondly, we need to involve those in authority. In other words, we need to escalate the situation to the next level of problem resolution.

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus tells us about four levels for restoring someone who is sinning by bringing them to repentance. The first level: “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”

If the matter is not resolved there, then Jesus describes the second level: “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.”

Then, if that does not resolve the problem, you escalate it to the third level: “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.”

And the next and final level: “But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” In other words, if you cannot stop this person from sinning against you, then ultimately the relationship must be terminated. Ongoing sin must not and cannot be tolerated.

There are a lot of qualifications that could be added to this; the many aspects of church discipline have been well developed elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the principle stands: if a problem cannot be settled at a personal level, then we are to involve those in authority. Authority figures exist in our lives in various spheres for the purpose of resolving righteous anger.

Children, if your brother or sister sins against you, you must ask him to stop. If he does not stop, then tell your parents, who are your authorities. Be specific and kind; tell them, “I believe Billy is sinning against me. This is what he has done. I asked him to stop, but he would not. Mom, Dad, will you help me?”

Likewise in the case of a church dispute, we first deal with the individual. If it is not resolved on a personal level, then we take it to the pastor, our authority in church matters. Similarly, we would involve the civil magistrates, the police, in the case of civil disputes. If, for example, your neighbor keeps throwing his garbage over the fence, first go to him personally. If he refuses to stop, call the civil authorities and ask them to deal with it.

In the workplace, perhaps someone is destroying your reputation, subverting your work, or lying about you. This is sin. You must first talk to him directly. If it cannot be resolved, then the solution is to go to your immediate supervisor; and if there is no resolution there, continue to go to the next authority level until the situation is resolved.

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<sup>29</sup> See *Church Discipline* by John Owen (1616-1683); *Corrective Church Discipline* by Albert N. Martin; and *Free Grace Broadcaster* 222, “Church Discipline”; all available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

Throughout, as we deal with any sin or any authority, we must keep a teachable heart in all humility. What we thought was sin may not be; there may be other explanations that we need to hear and learn from.

### **3. *Committing it to God***

After attempting to solve the problem at the personal level, we need to involve authority figures. If the problem cannot be settled by them, then there is a final step to be taken. Unresolved situations that provoke righteous anger must be committed to God. This means that we take the problem to the highest authority that there is: God Himself. We might say,

Dear Lord, I have followed all the principles in your Word for resolving this sinful behavior toward me. I can't get it resolved. Authority figures can't get it resolved. Oh Lord, I'm committing it to you to resolve it.

When we cannot stop sin against us, the temptation is to resolve it in an ungodly way. Our righteous anger may become sinful when we take matters into our own hands. Sinful anger not only has a sinful cause and a sinful expression, but it can also have a sinful attempt at resolution. It is written in Romans 12:19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place [i.e., give the Lord His place] unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." If the person sinning against us will not voluntarily stop and if authority figures cannot stop him, then we must not resort to the use of personal revenge, verbal attacks, violence, or other ungodly behaviors as we are often tempted to do.

Instead, we must walk in the steps of our Lord Jesus, of Whom it is said, "When he was reviled, [he] reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1Pe 2:23). Jesus received no good response when He personally reproved the Pharisees. The authority figure Pontius Pilate gave Him no justice. So what then did He do? Did He then strike out at these people to try to get justice for Himself?—He did not. He committed His case to God for God to deal with them. (Of course, we know that God did deal with those who sinned against our Lord Jesus Christ.)

In the same way, we must give up the right to revenge and trust God Himself to deal with the sin. Psalm 37:8-11 is a pivotal passage in committing the problem of sin to God. Observe the relationship between the resolution of anger and the committing of the problem to God. First there is the command:

<sup>8</sup> Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.

What reasons does the psalmist offer for trusting our anger into God's hands?

<sup>9</sup> For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth. <sup>10</sup> For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. <sup>11</sup> But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

Our God is a just God. He will punish the evil doer and reward the righteous in His own perfect timing.

Thus, when we have anger at sin, we try to resolve it at the personal level. If that does not work, then we try to resolve it by involving authority figures. But if that still does not work, we must take the problem to God and commit it into His wise and omnipotent hands. At this point, our anger should cease; we should come to an internal peace. In other words, the anger is not to go on and on. When others have sinned against us, committing the situation to God

is the end of our spiritual pain. We entrust the sin to Him to bring justice in His perfect timing. Once we have done that, we are commanded to “cease from anger, and forsake wrath.” We forsake any opportunities to get back at them since we could not get the problem resolved in the way in which we had hoped. We give it to God—and then let it go.

Just as we should not live in pain all the days of our lives, neither should we live in anger all the days of our lives. Sin provokes us to righteous anger, but there is sin around us all the time—we could be angry twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, every day of our lives! Instead, as each situation comes up that provokes us to righteous anger, we take the proper steps to deal with it. If it is not resolved, we then take that situation and give it to God. We let it go. Most sin against us and around us does not get resolved right away. The way to prevent ourselves from living in perpetual and continuous anger is to give those situations to God.<sup>30</sup>

By way of summary, if someone’s sin is making you angry, then do all you can biblically to turn him *from* continuing the sin *to* repentance over the sin. If this is unsuccessful, then give that situation to God for His just vengeance in His timing. Rest in Christ—and release the anger. It is important to have righteous anger against sin, but we must be sure that the anger is temporary so we do not live in perpetual anger. This is the way righteous anger is resolved.

## **E. Resolving Sinful Anger**

One of the responsibilities we have in dealing maturely with our anger is to discover and squarely face its cause. If we are honest we may find ourselves saying,

You know, my anger is not anger at someone else’s sin. I’m just angry at the way this circumstance worked out. My plans were thwarted and I didn’t get my way. Someone didn’t fulfill my expectations. He didn’t necessarily sin, but he didn’t do what I wanted or respond the way that I hoped. What I am feeling is frustration at the situation.

This kind of self-discovery requires us to deal with our own sinful attitudes and perspectives. To do this we need a fresh perspective.

Our wrong attitudes toward God produce sinful anger with Him, and we must reorient those attitudes; we must change our point of view. By reorienting our understanding of who we are and who God is, we can resolve our sinful anger. Here are three steps to follow to help us gain insight: we need to recognize God’s sovereignty, recognize His wisdom, and recognize His goodness.

### **1. Recognize God’s sovereignty**

In order to get a fresh perspective and reorient our attitudes toward ourselves and God, we need to recognize that God has a right to do with us as He pleases. In other words, when God does something through people or providences that frustrate and anger us, then we need to ask ourselves, “Who am I to question God’s decisions for my life?”

God has a right to do with us as He pleases for several reasons. First, *because He created us*. The classic example is the strange and horrendous trial of Job. Job became frustrated with God’s providences and, in Job 40:1-2, God helps His child reset his attitude. “Moreover the

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<sup>30</sup> Entrusting an offense to God is possible because God judges all sins in their proper time: for believers’ offenses, judgment has been rendered at the cross. For unbelievers, judgment will be rendered at the Last Day.



LORD answered Job, Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it.” In other words, God was saying to Job, “Who do you think you are to be contending with and instructing Me as to how I ought to manage your life, your situations, and the unfolding of the affairs you experience?” God later says, “Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?” (40:8). When Job heard God, he responded, “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth” (40:4). In other words, “I’ll shut my mouth from speaking against God, or expressing anger toward God.” When Job gained fresh insight into his true position before God, he gained the perspective that he needed in order to have faith in the midst of massive adversity. Isaiah 45:9 warns us, “Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou?” God Himself makes the point that we are not in a position to question Him or be angry with Him with reference to the decisions that He makes.

God has a right to do with us as He pleases not only because He created us, but also *because He redeemed us*.<sup>31</sup> When we as mere created beings sinned against God (Rom 3:23; 6:23), we lost all our rights to be protected and cared for by our Creator. But God in His grace and mercy brought His people up out of that miry clay and set our feet upon a solid rock (Psa 40:2; Rom 5:8). He established our goings and set us on a course to heaven. He redeemed us by the blood of His own Son (Rom 5:9). He forcefully declares this to us: “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price” (1Co 6:19-20). In other words, our bodies and our lives do not belong to us, they belong to Him; God therefore can do anything He pleases with them. It is His right because not only did He create us, He has also purchased us through redemption.<sup>32</sup> But that purchase of us does not make us mere property to be manipulated by an uncaring monarch. Instead, it makes us the adopted children of God, Who has committed Himself to being our Father, Who loves us with an everlasting love, Who works all things together for our good, and Who provides for all of our needs. What a blessing it is to belong to such a gracious God and be possessed by Him as His own! He owns us because He bought us with the precious blood of Christ (1Pe 1:19-21)!

It is not right to question an owner about his own possessions. They are his possessions, and he has a right to do with them as he pleases. Thus, when we become angry with God because of our finances, our struggles with sin, the person He brought for marriage, or whatever the circumstance may be—then we are in effect telling God that He does not have a right to govern us. We are saying, “God, You don’t have a right to do with me as You please. You don’t have a right to manage my life in the way You’ve managed it!” Of course, this is the heart of a sinful attitude (Rom 14:23). This is declaring that God is not the One Who owns us by way of creation and redemption—and that we have ownership rights to ourselves. We come to see this as tremendous folly when we understand that God upholds our very existence “by the word of his power” moment by moment (Heb 1:3). We would all pass out of existence altogeth-

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<sup>31</sup> **redeemed** – obtained release from captivity by paying a ransom; delivered from sin by paying the penalty. Those who are redeemed include all those who by faith are trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross as the substitutionary payment for the penalty due for their sins (Rom 3:24; Joh 3:16; 2Co 5:21).

<sup>32</sup> For more on the gospel, see *All of Grace* by Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

er if God let go of His protective hand upon us for one second. Who are we, therefore, to tell Him that He does not have a right to do with us as He pleases?

## **2. Recognize God's wisdom**

The first step, then, in resolving sinful anger against God is recognizing that He has a right to do with us as He pleases. However, it is not mere recognition of the sovereignty of God that will help us resolve our anger against Him. Secondly, we need to recognize that God's wisdom is infinitely superior to ours. One of the things we are all prone to do is to condemn God's wisdom in the way He manages our lives, and in the way He allows His providence to unfold. However, Proverbs 21:30 tells us, "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD." In other words, anyone that contradicts the Lord in His management of the world is someone who has no wisdom or understanding. The truth is that God has managed our lives with infinite wisdom; anyone who speaks against that wisdom is not wise—he has no understanding or prudent counsel.

To be angry at God's providences is to declare that we know better than Him how to manage our situations. The minute we start that way, we are departing from the path of wisdom and understanding. God says in Isaiah 55:8-9,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The principle here is that—in our finite, limited understanding—we will never be able to grasp the wisdom of God in the way He manages our lives. What we must do is simply trust His Word when it tells us He is infinitely wise. The fact that we do not see the wisdom in or understand the reasons for what is happening does not mean that wise reasons do not exist. The Bible tells us that all wisdom belongs to God alone, and our attitude as we face the unsearchable wisdom of God must be the attitude of Psalm 131:1, one of humility. If the Lord's thoughts are higher than my thoughts, then my attitude must be: "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me."

One of those things categorized as too high for us in Isaiah 55:8 is God's ways. He says, "My ways are higher than your ways." Therefore, instead of arguing with the ways of God, we need to humbly accept them as evidence of the wisdom of God. We must recognize that we do not have the capacity to deal in this realm. Would you ask a three-year-old to reach to the top shelf in the closet to get something down? It is too high for him; he cannot do it. Similarly, we cannot presume to reach up to heaven and understand all the ways of God and His dealings with us. It is too high for us; we cannot do it. We must simply trust God; we must have the wise attitude that says, "Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child" (Psa 131:2). When our condition does not match our desire, we must bring our desire down to our condition. If we do this, we will be comfortable with ourselves and pleasant to others—then our souls will be like a weaned child.

The counsel is: "Let Israel *hope in the LORD* from henceforth and for ever" (Psa 131:3). In other words,

Simply trust My wisdom in how I deal with you. Do not try to attain to it, understand it, or grasp it. Just trust it. Rest in the fact that My infinite wisdom is guiding affairs—not just casually, but in the best possible way for you in your particular circumstances and situations.

Is God worthy of that kind of trust? Think for a moment. God is wise enough to have made the creation that you see when you look outside your window and when you look at your own two hands. Is that same God wise enough to manage the affairs of your life? Let us look beyond this to the cross of Christ, and see the very righteousness of God at work on our behalf—in perfect wisdom and grace toward us unto eternal salvation. As we look, can we dare to mistrust Him for how He orders our affairs in this life? Indeed, when we gather around our Lord Jesus Christ in glory, we will all confess that He was and is a God worthy of all our trust and love. Let us all strive to grow up. Let us quit questioning and judging God’s wisdom and love for us in how He deals with us! Let us be as weaned children before our sovereign and wise God.

### **3. *Recognize God’s good purposes***

Not only must we recognize that God has a right to do with us as He pleases, but also, thirdly, if we are to resolve sinful anger toward God, we must recognize that God’s purpose is to do us good. God is sovereign and wise, and He is also good! We tend to look at hard situations in our lives and fail to see the goodness in them; but, once again, God’s ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9)! It is somewhat like when you are reading a novel with a complex plot: at the end of the book, you finally say, “Oh, that’s how it all fits together!” It all makes sense after you get to the end of the story—but while it was unfolding you could not figure it out. In the same way, God has purposes in all that happens in the world, and those purposes are to do us good; but a lot of the time we do not see the good until the “end of the story.”

Sometimes we will not see the good until we enter heaven, and sometimes God gives us a glimpse of it in this life. Regardless, listen to the promise of God with reference to all of your circumstances: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (Jer 29:11). In other words, when God in His providence deals in your life, He has certain thoughts and purposes. Those thoughts are not to punish you, harm you, or make you miserable. Those thoughts are to bring you peace and to give you an “expected end.”<sup>33</sup>

What is the end that we are to expect from God’s providential dealings in our lives? The end that we expect is an outcome of good and of peace. The Bible tells us, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). While a particular circumstance might not seem good, but rather highly irritating, it is actually working together for good. The expected outcome of all of the difficulty and pain is going to be peace (because those are the thoughts God has toward us) and good (because that is the conclusion that He has promised us). This is the expected end we wait for by faith, even when we may be going through horrendous difficulties.

With this perspective, and with it alone, we can follow the counsel of James 1:2-3, “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.” It is the molding and shaping of godly character within us that is the expected end. It is preparing us for more joy on earth and in heaven. While the process certainly is not pleasant and may be puzzling, we know that the One Who is in control is infi-

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<sup>33</sup> **expected end** – The foundation of this confidence is that Christ suffered the wrath of God in the believer’s place, and now he has been adopted by God as His child. Because of this, we know that when trouble comes to a believer it is not God’s wrath—for this can never be because that wrath is gone forever! (See Rom 5:1-11; 8:15; Gal 4:4-7; Eph 1:3-7; Heb 10:14; 12:5-14; Psa 103:12-13—and Free Grace Broadcaster 179, *Assurance and Perseverance*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.)

nately wise in His management, and that His purposes are purposes of peace and goodness to us. It is only as we exercise faith in these promises of God and truths from the Scripture that we will ever be able to resolve our anger toward God.

As we learn contentment, humility, submission, and trust toward God, we naturally put away sinful anger toward Him. There is no cheap or fast solution to the problem of anger toward God. It is a process of learning contentment, humility, submission, and trust. As we learn these things, we do not get upset at God's providential dealings in our lives. We learn to be content in whatsoever state we are in, to humble and quiet ourselves before God, because He has the right to do in our lives whatsoever He wants. We learn not to rely on our own understanding, but to trust in the Lord with all of our hearts (Pro 3:5).

To summarize, Proverbs 19:11 tells us that a wise man defers his anger. When we understand that God has a right to do with us as He pleases, that God's wisdom is infinitely superior to ours, that God's purpose is to do us good—then we do not get angry with God. However, if we do not understand, believe, and act on those things, then we are going to be often angry at God—because He seldom gives us what *we* think would be best for us. Thank God that He does not! If we were managing our own lives, it would take only a short time for us to make a total wreck of them.

Anger is a wonderful warning sign that God has given us to tell us that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. It is like the red light on the dash board of your car. Ordinarily it lies dormant, but every once in a while it comes on. Instantly you know that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. Our sinful anger is a warning sign that something is wrong in us and needs to be fixed. This is important to know. Our sinful anger reveals to us our immaturity and our lack of submission, faith, trust, and humility. It tells us where we need to grow. When we become sinfully angry, therefore, we must say to ourselves,

Oh, God is turning on a red light here. He is telling me that there is something in my life that needs to be worked on. I need to have a better attitude of submission. I need to have more confidence in God's wisdom. I need to have more trust that His purpose is to do me good.

Sinful anger is a good diagnostic tool for our spiritual maturity.

Our righteous anger is equally a warning sign that something is wrong with others. It gives us direction and motivation for ministry in the area of correction and restoration of others. When righteous anger occurs in us, the red light on the dash board is coming on to say, "It is time for ministry; here is a ministry that you need to engage in."

#### **4. Actions to take**

There are three biblical principles to apply as we confront our own sinful anger.

##### ***a. Deal with the risings of anger immediately***

First, we must deal with the risings of anger immediately (Eph 4:26). As soon as steps are taken to resolve it, we will begin to cool down. If each matter is dealt with as soon as it comes up, it will not build to unmanageable proportions. One of the reasons why we often compound our sins of anger is because we do not deal with them immediately. Someone does something and we become "offended"; we avoid confrontation and do not deal with it. They do it again; we still do not deal with it. Again it happens, and yet we do not deal with it. All the while, the anger is building because we fail to follow the steps for resolving it—and suddenly we wind up

boiling over, or clamming up, in a sinful expression of anger to hurt others. Sinful anger toward God may build within us too, instead of our instantly dealing with our lack of trust, submission, humility, and contentment.

We let anger build within us until it becomes a mountain. Do you know what happens to your car if you fail to take care of that red light immediately? The problem gets worse: what was a leak in the radiator turns into an expensive rebuilding of the motor. Likewise, if you deal with anger when it first arises, then it is closer to a simple fix. If you let it build, eventually you will have to repair an engine—a marriage, a destroyed relationship with a child, or a major conflict in your church.

*b. Face sources of anger from the past*

Secondly, be sure that sources of anger from the past have been faced and resolved. Each one of us has a personal life history. Things have happened to us in the past, and some of those incidents have never been resolved. Because they have not been resolved, we carry anger around inside us. That anger has been lying there, festering,<sup>34</sup> for years and years. Then someone comes along and does one little thing—and we just explode. That one little thing was not sufficient to cause that degree of reaction. What is going on? It occurred because of the incidents of sin against us and sinful behavior on our part from the past that never have been faced and resolved. As a result, anger continues to exist. It forms a baseline of anger that only requires a small provocation to cause it to erupt like a volcano—or to trigger real irritation and frustration, sending us into a moody withdrawal. It is imperative that we not only deal with our present anger and its sources, both righteous and sinful, but that we also deal with our past sources of anger, both righteous and sinful, that have never been resolved. When we resolve them, we can know peace in the present. And just as importantly, we only have to deal with new issues from that time forward—none from the past.

*c. Seek accountability*

Thirdly, we need to seek help and accountability from other people. James 5:16 reads, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” Because we are ashamed to tell others about our sins, we often try going it alone to resolve them; but God never intended this. We do not need to broadcast our sins to the whole world, but if we have not successfully dealt with our past anger, we are not likely to fix it on our own in the future. We need help. Wise pastors will ask couples who have been struggling for years, “Let me help with marriage counseling.” No, they do not want any help. “But if you haven’t resolved your marriage problems in years on your own, do you think you are going to fix them on your own in the future?” In the same way, when we have the besetting sin<sup>35</sup> of anger—having struggled with it for years without being able to overcome it on our own—we are not likely ever to overcome it on our own. This is the reason God has given us a loving, trusting community of believers in the local church. Our fellow believers there understand personally what it is to be a sinner. They have compassion on those who are in sin and want nothing more than to help. They want to encourage and restore someone who is in sin with a spirit of meekness (Gal 6:1), because they know how easy it is for them to be overtaken with their own sins.

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<sup>34</sup> **festering** – becoming worse or more intense, especially through long-term neglect or indifference.

<sup>35</sup> **besetting sin** – sin to which we are most easily and habitually tempted (Heb 12:1).

The point is this: anger is not a place to stop: it is a place to start. It is a place to begin finding solutions to the problems of which it makes us aware. Ask yourself: Am I an angry person? Am I angry now? If you are, then there is a problem. Find out what it is and deal with it. Once you do, then your anger will have accomplished its God-given purpose. Again, we do not *stop* with anger, cutting off relationships amidst problems. Rather, we *start* with anger because God gave it to us for the purpose of resolving sin—either in our individual lives or in the lives of the people around us.

This is how to maturely face and respond to anger. If we will do this, we will see anger as an ally, a wonderful diagnostic tool, a red light on the dashboard to tell us that something needs to be fixed. As we do resolve those things, we find ourselves able to travel down the road of life in peace, contentment, security, and joy. If we ignore those red lights and just go on, then it will not be very long before everything comes to a grinding halt—in particular, our relationships! Like engines, it is a lot easier to maintain relationships than to rebuild them.

*Our kind and gracious Heavenly Father, we thank You so much for Your mercy to us. We confess that we have sinned against You many times with our anger. Lord, we have not resolved even righteous anger in the way in which we should. We pray that You might help us to deal with anger in a mature way—to recognize its value, discover its source, and then deal with it according to its nature. Oh Lord, give us wisdom in all of this. We need wisdom to discern between righteous and sinful anger. We need wisdom to know ourselves, and we need courage to face the past and deal with many of those things that have never been resolved. We pray that in the effort to deal with those things we might not create more problems, but that we might resolve the problems that are there. Oh, Father, give us wisdom. Direct us in the paths of righteousness for Your name's sake. Thank you for the gift of anger. May we use it and not abuse it. We ask it in Jesus' name and for His sake, Amen.*

## 5. Dealing with Others' Anger

### A. Review

We have considered several aspects of the biblical doctrine of anger. We are to have righteous anger toward the things that anger God. He is angry at sin; we are to be angry at sin as well. On the other hand, sinful anger is ultimately anger at God Himself, and its cause is pride. Sinful anger is serious because it is extremely destructive. The cure for sinful anger is to reject pride and submit to God's sovereign rule over our circumstances.

Also, we as believers have hope because it is possible to manage our own sinful anger. First, we must recognize the purpose and value of anger. It is like pain. It has an important and temporary purpose to indicate to us that something is morally wrong and needs to be fixed. It is the warning system of the soul: it awakens us to a problem we need to remedy.

Secondly, we need to discover and squarely face the causes of our anger. We must ask ourselves, "Why did I get angry? What was the cause? Was it sinful or righteous anger?"

Thirdly, we need to implement biblical procedures for resolving our anger. If we have righteous anger toward another's sin, we must try to resolve it through biblical methods—first at the personal level, then incorporating authority figures, and ultimately giving the situation over to God to exercise His justice in His perfect timing. However, if it is sinful anger in our-

selves, then we need to repent of the wrong attitudes that caused it and deepen our awareness of God's sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness toward us.

Clearly, managing *our own* anger always is a top priority. Now we need to understand how to deal with anger in *other people*, for we all have been in the presence of others who are angry. How do we respond and deal with such persons? What guidelines does the Bible give us for dealing with anger in others? We will consider how to deal with anger in others that is directed toward us and that is directed toward others. Then, importantly, we will consider people who have habitual anger.

## **B. Anger Toward Us**

We need to know how we are to deal with those who are angry with us. Throughout our lives we will find ourselves to be the object of someone's anger. It is not a pleasant situation. Often, our first response is to return the anger, retaliating with the same attitude that was shown us. This always makes the situation worse! People are angry at us and speak to us in an angry tone, so we speak back in an angry tone; they get even angrier, and we get even angrier. Before you know it, we have a major conflict. A small event grows to lots of sinning on everyone's part.

Now, there has to be a better way for dealing with those who are angry with us—and there is.

### **1. General steps to take**

*“Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”*

—James 1:19

When someone is angry with us, the counsel of James 1:19-20 is very helpful. We need to take three steps.

#### **a. Pause**

The first thing we should do is to pause: to be “slow to speak.” Most sin comes from immediate, instinctive, reactionary, and unthinking responses to provocation. In other words, when someone shows anger toward us, we tend to blast right back without even thinking. It is imperative that we do not respond like this.

Let us make this our principle: we will not respond at all until we have had some time to collect our thoughts in order to react responsibly, to be slow to speak. The person who speaks quickly speaks before thinking. Many fathers tell their children, “Engage your mind before putting your mouth in gear.” How imperative it is that we do engage our minds before we put our mouths in gear! In order to do so, we must be slow to speak. This does not mean that we are to clam up and never speak; but it does mean that we are to take a few seconds—or even a few minutes, whatever is necessary—to give us time to collect our thoughts and to respond rationally rather than instinctively. With this pause, we resist the instinctive responses.

When someone expresses anger toward you, make it a principle that you will be slow to speak in response to that anger. Proverbs 15:18 says, “A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth [i.e., calms] strife.” Therefore, when someone is angry with us,

the first thing we must do is to pause. We do not react; we do not do anything. We give ourselves a few moments to think.

*b. Evaluate*

When we pause, what are we to think about? We are not only to pause, but, secondly, we are to evaluate. We do not pause just to allow time to pass unused. We are not being idle during our pause; we are thinking very rapidly. The reason we pause—are “slow to speak”—is to give a few moments to ask ourselves some questions.

We must ask ourselves, first of all, “Why is this person angry? What is the cause of this anger, and why am I the object of it?” We must evaluate whether the anger is righteous or sinful. We must ask, “Does this person have a legitimate right to be angry at me? Did I sin against him; did my sin cause his anger? Or does he have sinful anger as a result of his not getting his way?” It is crucial that we make this evaluation. Without a proper diagnosis, a proper response is impossible.

*c. Respond softly*

*“A soft answer turneth away wrath:  
but grievous words stir up anger.”*

—Proverbs 15:1

When someone is angry with us, we need to pause, we need to evaluate, and, thirdly, we need to respond. Our response will vary based on the results of our evaluation. But there is one principle that applies to every situation: regardless of the type of anger we are facing, our response must always consist of a soft answer. “A soft answer turneth away wrath.” What is a soft answer? It is one that is gentle, quiet, and non-combative. It is the opposite of a strong and aggressive response. Specifically, it means that when you respond, you primarily must keep your voice down, i.e., lower the volume. Typically, people start to raise their voices when they are angry. We think we have to raise our voices a little louder in order to triumph over the other. Then they respond by getting louder, and before long we have a screaming match on our hands. After reaching the limits of human vocal capability, we have to get out the microphones and amplifiers, or become physical! Instead of that, if we respond with a quiet and calm voice when others yell at us, we will find them immediately lowering their voices. It is amazing what the lowering of voices does to diffuse a situation.

A soft answer also involves selecting the least provoking terms to express ourselves. Consider these two statements: “You know, I am not sure you are being wise,” and “You know, you’re acting like an idiot.” Both statements have the same essence, but obviously one phrase communicates it in a far more provoking manner than the other. Thus, our pause gives us time to select the language that is least likely to provoke the other person to further fits of anger.

The last part of Proverbs 15:1 states, “But grievous words stir up anger.” Grievous words are what we want to avoid. What are grievous words? They are fighting words, words used to strike out at someone. As a general rule, adults have more self-control than to immediately start pummeling<sup>36</sup> one another with their fists. Instead, we pummel one another with our words. Someone strikes us with a word, so we strike him back with a word, and he strikes us again. This is just a verbal fist-fight.

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<sup>36</sup> **pummeling** – striking or beating.



When people hurt us with their angry words, the temptation is to hurt them back with our angry words; but this just gives them reason to be even angrier. They are not only angry with us for the original circumstance, but now they are angry with us because we have stung them with our words. The result is that they come on even stronger, and the fight escalates from there. The situation needs to be diffused, not further inflamed. The crucial elements in diffusing anger are a low and soft tone of voice, and the use of the least provocative words.

Proverbs 15:28 says, “The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things.” When a wicked person comes into contact with an angry person, he just pours out evil; but if a righteous person comes into contact with an angry person, he studies to answer. He thinks, “How should I answer this person?” A soft answer turns away wrath like water quenches a fire. You can pour gas on a fire, which will inflame it; or you can pour water on it, which will subdue it. Thus, irrespective of your evaluation of the anger, your response needs to be with a soft answer and without grievous words. People often come on strong in their anger because they think they must in order to make a point. However, when we react with a soft answer, they realize that they do not have to force their way. They start to lower their voices because they realize that we understand them. This enables them to calm down.

## ***2. Specific steps to take***

Knowing that all of our responses to anger must contain a soft answer without grievous words, now we must consider specific responses. We must follow different courses of action depending on who is at fault.

### ***a. If we are in the wrong***

If our own sin is the proper object of someone else’s righteous anger, then we need to follow the counsel of Matthew 5:25, “Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him.” If someone is angry with you because you sinned against him, his anger toward you is righteous and, therefore, you need to agree with him. You must say, “You know, you’re right. I was in the wrong. God has convicted me of my sin. I confess my wrong to Him and to you.” And then you must also say, and mean it, “Would you please be willing to forgive me?” This removes the need for anger. Admitting our wrongdoing and asking forgiveness for it is the way to respond to people who are righteously angry with us.

### ***b. If their anger is wrong***

We follow a different course of action when we encounter sinful anger in another. We must point out, as tactfully as possible, that the person is wrong to be angry. We must demonstrate why he is wrong in being angry with us, and we must try to bring him to repentance over his anger. This has to be done very tactfully, because a person who is sinfully angry is also often a person who is proud. You will remember we saw that pride was the cause of sinful anger. Thus, when we try to bring a person to repentance over his pride, it hurts his pride! This is a very difficult situation, but we must not justify his anger by giving in to it—that is what we do when we say we are sorry even though we have done nothing genuinely wrong. If the anger is sinful, we need to point that out as tactfully, kindly, and softly as possible. We need to demonstrate the reason it is wrong to be angry with us.

God did this very thing with Jonah. After God showed mercy to the Ninevites, the Bible tells us, “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry” (Jon 4:1). With whom was he angry?—he was angry with God! The incident continues:

And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. (4:2)

Jonah was angry with God because God showed mercy to Nineveh when the city repented. Jonah had a sinful anger: he wanted to see judgment on the city. Jonah 4:3-4 says,

Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live. Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?

This is a soft answer from the Lord, a very soft answer. God asked Jonah a question. He didn’t say, “Jonah, you are angry. You need to stop it, you are sinning against Me.” He asked him a question, asking Jonah to judge himself. This is a good approach when someone is angry with us without having a right to be. Just ask him, “Do you think that you are doing the right thing to be angry with me in this situation?” Then he has to judge himself. When *we* act like a judge and pass judgment on someone, then the instant, instinctive response is for him to defend himself, perhaps with more anger. On the other hand, when we ask *him* to pass judgment on himself, often he will be harder on himself than we would be. At the least, he will have to deal with his own conscience instead of our having to deal with it. Ask him, “Do you think it is the right thing to be angry with me? Why?” Then, having to justify his anger, he will often see the foolishness of it for himself.

The Lord then used an object lesson with Jonah. Notice in Jonah 4:6-11 how gentle and soft God was with him.

And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? [Notice that God asked Jonah a question once again.] And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand<sup>37</sup> persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

God used an object lesson with Jonah and continued to ask him questions. Apparently Jonah did repent of his anger because a) Jonah wrote this book (no one else was a firsthand witness to its events); b) the book is an indictment of Jonah himself and his sinful rebellion against God; and c) in order to write rationally about his sinful anger without defending himself, Jonah first must have repented. If people are sinfully angry with us, then we need to follow God’s example. We need to show them their errors—as tactfully as possible, perhaps using

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<sup>37</sup> **sixscore thousand** – 120,000 (a score is twenty).

illustrations and asking questions—and point them to judge themselves in an attempt to turn away their anger.

This, then, is how we deal with those that are angry with us. We pause, we evaluate, and we act according to whether the anger is righteous or sinful—and always with a soft answer.

### **C. Anger toward Others**

We have just considered how to deal with those who are angry with us, but we have all been in the presence of people who are angry with others. In those situations, we are often in a position to help them deal with their anger. The best way to help others deal with their own anger is simply to take them through the same steps that apply to us.

First, help them to analyze their anger. Ask them, “Why are you angry with the other person? Do you have sinful or righteous anger? Are you angry at the sin, or are you angry because you didn’t get your way and your expectations were not fulfilled?”

Secondly, help them to know how properly to express their anger. Give them counsel about the right expression of it. Someone may say, “I’m going to really tell that person off next time I see him!” You can respond, “You know, it is more effective to be controlled and rational in your expression of anger. If you really want to resolve the situation, don’t use violence and bad language, but speak softly.”

Thirdly, guide them to properly resolve their anger. If their anger is righteous, then they should go to the offender one on one to try to resolve it on the personal level. If that does not work, then involve authority figures. If that does not work, then commit the matter to God. However, if they have sinful anger, then remind them of God’s wisdom, His goodness, and His right to rule in their lives. Exhort them also to repent, confess their sin, and ask forgiveness if they have offended the other.

These are the steps to take them through: help them to analyze their own anger, help them to know how to properly express their anger, and guide them to properly resolve their anger.

Generally, people will allow you to do this more easily when you are not the object of their anger and when you have a decent relationship with them, one in which you can offer them counsel. Often you can get them calmed down and thinking clearly about the situation, and you can guide them into a proper response. A very clear example of this is found again in the story of Naaman the Syrian coming to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. 2 Kings 5:9-14 tells us,

So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. But Naaman was wroth [i.e., extremely angry], and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

You see, his pride was offended because he was not given the proper dignity that he deserved as the second in command in his nation. Only a little messenger came out to tell him to go take a bath in the river. This is how he interpreted it, so he was very angry because his pride had been injured at the way in which he had been treated. He goes on to say in his rage:

Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.

With whom is he angry? He is angry with Elisha; he is furious with him. Now, notice the behavior of those with whom he was not angry:

And his servants came near [notice, he is not angry with his servants, but they are in the presence of an angry person] and spake unto him, and said, My father [notice the respect they use], if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?

Notice that they are asking questions. They are not saying, “You fool, he told you to go wash in the river. Why didn’t you go wash in the river?” They did not come making accusatory statements; they came asking questions.

My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? [The answer is clearly yes.] How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?

So they came asking him questions, and in so doing they basically were asking him to judge his own anger, its basis, and its foolishness.

Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

Here we have a very clear example of dealing with someone who is angry with another. The servants showed respect to the angry person. He was not put down; he was not told, “You know, you are acting foolishly here.” The angry person was asked questions; he was asked to judge his own anger. In causing him to examine himself, he saw the wrong in what he was doing—and he turned away from it. This is the same way that God spoke with Jonah.

## **D. Habitual Anger**

We have seen how we are to deal with those who are angry with us and with those who are angry with others. Now we need to consider how to deal with those who are angry as the general habit of their lives. Previously we have been considering how to deal with individual incidents of anger, either toward ourselves or others. However, we have all run into people who are just downright angry people. They are angry all of the time! They are people who are consistently and regularly angry. One cannot be around them for very long before noticing that they are seething on the inside or they are exploding on the outside.

Now, there are a lot of reasons why people are like this, and it is not our purpose to go into those. Instead we want to understand *how to deal* with people who are chronically angry. The Bible gives us several guidelines. Romans 12:18 says, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” It is very hard to live peaceably with chronically angry people, but the Bible gives us some guidelines to help us.

### ***1. Avoid them when possible***

First, in dealing with habitually angry people, we should avoid them if at all possible. Proverbs 22:24-25 tells us, “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: Lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul.” The Bible recognizes that there are people that do not just become angry, but who are always angry. There are people who do not just become angry, but they live as angry people. The Bible counsels us to stay away from such people if at all possible. One of the reasons we are to stay away from these people is to prevent us from becoming like them. The Bible says in Proverbs 13:20, “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.” We become

like the people that we are around. If we are around angry people all the time, it will not be long before *we* are angry all the time. So if you can possibly avoid such people, do so. Proverbs 21:19 tells us, “It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman [or man].” In other words, living with angry people is not a pleasant experience. They will make our lives miserable.

Also, don’t marry an angry person. Young people, when considering a potential marriage partner,<sup>38</sup> you need to ask: Is this person a chronically angry person? Does this person have a temper, and does he explode (or withdraw) on a regular basis? If the person does have such a temper, separate yourself as far from them as you can. You do not want to marry such a person, nor do you want their friendship. You do not even want to be around such a person!

## **2. *Avoid provoking them***

Therefore, avoid chronically angry people if at all possible. But what if you cannot get away from them? Perhaps you have married such a person or have them as a parent. Perhaps you have someone like this as a boss in a job that you cannot leave. When you cannot avoid them (the first guideline), the Scriptures give three additional guidelines. The first of these is to avoid provoking them whenever possible. It is usually obvious what things set off angry people. We need to avoid doing those things as much as possible. Proverbs 30:33 says, “Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood.” If somebody grabs your nose and twists it, it is going to bleed. This is basic cause and effect. It continues: “So the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.” In other words, if you do not want strife or conflict, if you want to live peaceably with these people, do not do the things that make them angry. This means that you do not push their particular hot buttons.<sup>39</sup>

Proverbs 29:8 tells us, “Scornful men bring a city into a snare: but wise men turn away wrath.” This picture is of a city near aggressive neighbors who, if treated with contempt, will attack and destroy the city. Wise men will know how to deal with those hostile neighbors so that they do not bring their wrath against the city, but rather restrain it. It is simply the part of wisdom to make a study of angry people, to figure out what makes them angry, and to avoid doing those things. This makes life much more pleasant. This is not to say that their anger is justified, righteous, or anything else. It is just a defensive strategy that we employ, even toward those that become sinfully angry, in order to live as peaceably as possible with them (Rom 12:18).

## **3. *Accommodate without compromising***

Next, give in to these chronically angry people if no compromise of principle is involved. Ecclesiastes 10:4 says, “If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences.” If someone is offended at you, and you can give him his way without sinning or sacrificing some biblical principle, do it. You do not have to win. That is what Jesus taught us in Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” A meek person is one that does not insist on getting his way. He is one who does not retaliate. He does not demand his share of rights.

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<sup>38</sup> See *Pathway to Christian Marriage* by John Thompson, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>39</sup> **hot buttons** – figure of speech for circumstances that habitually provoke someone to anger; taken from push-button switches that set machines into action.

People wonder if this means we will have to let some people walk all over us. Yes, this is exactly what it means. There is a time and place to do so as long as we are not compromising biblical principles. After reflecting on it, I have found many times—when I could have stood up for my rights and insisted on my way—that it really did not matter if I got my way. I realized that if I insisted on my way, it would just cause a conflict. I have thought, “Why not just give in? It isn’t worth the fight.” I am secure enough in myself to realize that “giving in” does not mean that I am a coward. In fact, it is a manifestation of strength: “He that ruleth his spirit is mightier than he that taketh a city” (Pro 16:32). So when we are able to be more mature and selfless than others, giving in instead of demanding our way, then what we actually demonstrate is not weakness but strength. Christ could have called twelve legions of angels to destroy the Romans and His Jewish opponents in one moment, but He did not (Mat 26:53). There is a place and a time to let others have their way.

All of these points have qualifications, but they are beyond the scope of this writing. Nevertheless, the principles are valid. Apply them with wisdom.

#### **4. God is in control**

We need to avoid chronically angry people when possible. Those whom we cannot avoid, we need to avoid provoking. And we need to give in to them if it does not compromise principle. The final guideline is that we must remember that God is in control of angry people. Psalm 76:10 tells us, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.” When you are living with an angry person, you need to remember that God is control of that person. When God allows him or her to express sinful anger toward you, God is going to use that anger for His glory and your good. All other expressions of anger God is going to restrain!

That gives us a great deal of peace when we are in the presence of an angry person who is bigger, stronger, and meaner than we are. We know that, no matter how angry this person gets with us, he will not be able to do anything without God’s permission and approval. If God has given His permission, then we can accept whatever may happen to us. While God never justifies sin, He does use the sinful acts of men to accomplish His glory and the ultimate good of His people. The classic example of this is the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the greatest sin ever in history, yet God used it for His great glory and the magnificent good of His people, delivering them from the penalty and power of sin! When people are sinfully angry with you and you bear its brunt, remember that God is in control of it. He will give you His peace in the midst of it.

These are some biblical perspectives on dealing with those around us who are angry. As we reflect on and implement these, we will become better at dealing with angry people; we will be God’s instruments for peace.

In addition, when people use these principles on us, we need to recognize it as their dealing biblically with us. We need to be teachable, repent, and follow Christ with all of our hearts.

*Our Father, we thank You that You are the God Who is in control of every person, event, emotion, and circumstance. We pray that You would give us wisdom in dealing with those who are angry with us. Give us the humility to admit it when their anger is justified and when our anger is not. Lord, we pray that You will help us to help others properly manage their anger. And we pray that You would protect us from the chronically angry. Deliver us from their*

*hands. Father, we pray that none of our young people would marry an angry person. For those who are married to such, we pray that they would have wisdom in living peaceably with them as much as possible. May there be no compromise of principles or responsibility in so doing. May there be wisdom; may we be wise as serpents and harmless as doves in these matters.<sup>40</sup> Lord, thank You that Your just wrath toward Your people has been fully satisfied in the death of Your dear Son, Jesus Christ, so that You have no more righteous anger toward them—for once the Lord is angered, who can deliver himself? We thank You that in Christ You have delivered Your children from the wrath to come. And Lord, most of all, may we be delivered from our own sinful anger. We ask it in Jesus name and for His sake, Amen.*

## Questions

*for personal reflection and group discussion*

*The following questions are designed to reinforce understanding and application. A separate study guide with complete questions covering all aspects of the text is also available for correspondent, independent, or group study. Contact Mount Zion Bible Institute at the same address or [school@mountzion.org](mailto:school@mountzion.org).*

1. Briefly describe the distinction between righteous and sinful anger.
2. List three indications that you are lacking righteous anger.
3. Sinful anger has three characteristics. Briefly describe each of them.
4. How and why does pride trigger anger in us when things do not work out our way?
5. Who is the ultimate object of sinful anger? Why?
6. List the steps in the cure for sinful anger. What do they each accomplish?
7. In what way would it help you control sinful anger to reflect on
  - a. How *you* have treated *God*?
  - b. How *God* has treated *you*?
8. What four important things must we understand in order to overcome the root of sinful anger (pride)?
9. Like pain, how does anger help us?
10. Anger always has a source. What questions must we ask ourselves when we get angry in order to deal maturely with it?
11. What are the three steps to follow when our anger is toward God?
12. What result can we expect from God's providential dealings in our lives?
13. What are the three biblical principles to apply as we confront our own sinful anger?
14. Why is it important that we deal with past sources of our anger, both righteous and sinful, that have never been resolved?
15. What are the three steps to managing our own sinful anger?
16. What three steps do we need to take when someone is angry with us?

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<sup>40</sup> See Matthew 10:16.

17. If you cannot avoid such a habitually angry person, what two things must you do?
18. What is a “soft answer”? What effect does it have?
19. What do each of the following verses teach us about anger and how to respond to anger?
- a. Proverbs 19:19
  - b. Proverbs 25:28
  - c. Proverbs 14:29
  - d. Proverbs 19:11
  - e. Proverbs 15:18
  - f. Proverbs 15:28
20. How do each of the following verses relate to our anger?
- a. James 4:15
  - b. Job 1:21
  - c. Romans 8:28
  - d. Matthew 18:15-17
  - e. 1 Peter 2:23
  - f. Psalm 37:8-11
  - g. Isaiah 55:8-9
  - h. Psalm 131:2
  - i. James 1:2-3
  - j. Matthew 5:5