



“Anger: Yours, Mine and What To Do With It”

Ephesians 4:25-32; Matthew 5:43-48

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It was one of those busy and rushed Tuesday mornings, the kind we all have from time to time. I was cutting an appointment close so that I could finish one more thing before leaving. I was determined, as always, to be on time but I had given myself the “drive like your life depended upon it” lecture enough to choose risking being late rather than getting in an automobile accident.

If you are time-oriented, you know how it is when you might be late. If anyone does anything to slow you down, you are ready to assign their eternal destiny to the infernal region. So I was in a hurry, carefully balancing my emotional state between tranquility and frantic rushing – driving the fastest 30 miles an hour that the speedometer will register and concentrating on making the shrewdest lane changes possible.

They could have filmed a movie in my car. I could just see it. It’s the end of the world and this one man (who has a secret formula that could save the world), has to reach his destination before the aliens catch him – but he can only go 30 miles per hour.

If I would have received a ticket, it would have been for excessive stress. And right when I thought I was going to make the traffic light (that I deemed crucial to my obsessive need to be on time), someone pulled out in front of me, cutting me off. They¹ were driving like they were on their way to a Sunday afternoon picnic. I would have passed the car in a moment but it was also weaving lazily back and forth between the lanes and this was at ten in the morning.

I determined that I was going to manage my stress properly so I took slow deep breaths, gently letting out the air. While I was doing this, I began to pass the time wondering what kind of medication combinations were in effect in this person who was driving all over the road at this time of day.

¹ Third person plural is being used to avoid a gender reference throughout this story.

By this time, another driver had pulled up along side of me and was also frustrated by the erratic driving pattern of the car ahead of us that was taking up both lanes of the road. Undoubtedly he was further confused by looking over at me, driving along beside him, attempting to manage my stress with relaxation breathing but looking as if I was doing Lamaze exercises. Here he was, stuck behind some Valium addict and the man in the car next to him was in labor.

I saw a chance to safely creep up and pass this erratic driver but with a driving pattern like this, I wondered if it would ever be safe. I said to myself, if the car is weaving all over the road, what would prevent it from banging into me as I passed because it would probably cause me at least an hour delay as we would exchange information for the insurance companies? So by the time I was pulling alongside this driver, I was muttering something to the effect that I hate drivers who drive like me. In doing so, I decided to appropriately express my frustration with one honk of the car horn as I passed.

This honk would serve two purposes. It would inform the driver that if they were sleeping, they should wake up and straighten out. More importantly, this distinct blast of the horn would also serve notice that in the world court of experienced drivers, they have been condemned as a deviant and reprobate driver and if they want to drive like that, they should do it in an amusement park on the bumper cars. You can pack a lot of communication into one honk of your horn.

There was a lot of therapy for me and declaration of judgment that went behind that brief but distinct honk as I pulled up beside that car to pass. But, of course, it would have to be a parishioner of the church.

I did the courageous thing one must do when one makes a moral stand for a social issue. I put my hand up on the side of my face, quickly slowed down and pulled back into their blind spot and I made the

quickest right turn a little Ford Escort is able to make on two wheels.

What makes you angry? Perhaps you're a very organized person who has the gift of spatial perception and it really bothers you when a member of your household changes rolled tissue the wrong way. (This is when the paper is supposed to roll out from the top so you can get at the end of it.) But instead of it being positioned "correctly," you discover that the paper roll is backwards and you have to laboriously reach under the round of the roll and spin it until you find the end. Does that make you angry?



Maybe you're living with one of those organized persons who has this gift of spatial perception but you're more laid-back. You feel that life has more pressing issues than rolls of paper facing one way or another. And one day you discover that this organized person has taken it upon themselves to make you a sign with one of those plastic tape sign makers. And the sign says: "When changing roll, please remember to position roll in such a way as to have it unroll with the end coming from the top." Perhaps that would make you angry.

We're talking about anger this morning but you've probably noticed that the Bible passage does not say: "thou shalt not be angry." We could take a clue from Jesus.

Recall that He didn't spend much time talking about the outward act of committing murder. As in our culture today, His culture pretty much acknowledged that the killing of another human being is prohibitive. Instead, Jesus went to the cause of murder and discussed our inward nature.

He talked about love and hate, about revenge and resentment. He talked about the injustices that cause bitterness and the powerful cultural conditioning that drags us along to do whatever everyone else seems to do because of the frustrations of life. He said: 'You've heard that it was said to do this or that but *I* tell you that if your heart is not right about someone else, it is the same as if you committed the outward immoral act'

Think about this, if you will. We are born as purely pleasure-seeking beings. In the beginning, we

are governed by our emotions so that what we want we feel we deserve. When an infant is hungry she or he cries. When a teen is denied permission to stay out all night because "everyone else" is supposedly doing it, they may become quite angry.

But our most compelling need is for love. When this need is denied, we feel anger. Because life is hard and because all our needs are not always met, life is sometimes frustrating and anger-provoking.

Anger is a feeling and feelings are not moral in themselves. There is nothing wrong or sinful about feeling angry. We feel angry because some behavior or circumstance has caused us pain. We always feel angry for a reason and the feeling itself is not wrong – it's o.k. to feel angry.

Interestingly, placid and peaceful people are *sometimes* mismanaging their anger. In their book listed in the bibliography, Doctors Bach and Goldberg suggest that people who are *always* smiling and calm and who always appear to be satisfied with what goes on around them sometimes have minimal emotional involvements with other people. They tend to have little interpersonal commitment. So on the surface they are placid but beneath, they are sometimes just passive and detached.

Our society seems to reward those who appear placid. The people who never express anger or confront others are easier to be around because they never ask us to change what we are doing. Change is work. It might be out of laziness, then, that we tend to gravitate to those who are described as "not having an angry bone in their body" or "he wouldn't hurt a fly" or "she's as gentle as a lamb" or "they're a great couple, ... they never fight or argue."

It might have come from our upbringing, particularly in a Christian home. Perhaps, for you, it may have been in the military where you were conditioned to *never* question an authority. We have often been wrongly taught that anger is wrong – that we shouldn't express our disapproval – particularly to our parents. We are trained not to express our anger. But if we have no outlet to express our anger, we are not only mismanaging it, we are also setting ourselves up to be managed or controlled by it. Like the heat in a pressure cooker, the anger doesn't go away. The

people who refuse to “make waves” in a relationship find waves of anger flowing over them from within. Those who always repress their anger and always try to look calm will often end up depressed because depression is simply anger turned inward.

The results of stress in our body, brought about by chronic anger that has no place to go, is well known in the medical field. The doctors who treat us are fully aware that repressed anger within us is among the causes for ulcers, asthma, migraine headaches, hypertension and arthritis. Stress has a documented direct connection with our immune system which is related to cancer and other immunosuppressant diseases. Physicians are not saying that all these things are always caused by repressed anger. They are saying that repressed anger often is the cause.



Mismanaged anger is a result of the way we relate to other people. A person who isn't freed up to express their anger and frustration can easily resort to passive aggression. This is when someone is aggressive and angry with indirect behavior.

Forgetting is sometimes an expression of anger. Someone who can't say “I don't want to go there” might, instead, say that they “forgot about it.” Chronic procrastination and being late are common forms of expressing anger.

Some anger is expressed by deliberately misunderstanding. Those who act confused or just unable to put it all together, (those who act in ways that cause others to label them as “air-heads”) may actually be very angry people.

Anger can cause us to become ritualistic and do repetitive behavior – to become obsessed with things and tasks in an attempt to channel our anger. Mismanaged anger causes anxiety, chronic fatigue, paranoid suspiciousness and sometimes even suicide. It appears that we have all sorts of ways we channel our anger.

Some people come right out with it and vent. They say, for example, “I am annoyed that I am left doing all the tasks of maintaining the household and I'm fed up and frustrated.”

Others withdraw to silence and their anger throws up a wall that refuses to let communication pass. Some people use humor and sarcasm to express their anger. If you look at most comedy, you will see that there is occasionally anger behind the humor. Someone once pointed out that most of the best comedians had horrible experiences in their upbringing. Humor is therapy for them.

Our culture knows that we all tend to carry around a certain amount of anger within us so it creates outlets for aggression. Sports is obviously one way in which people channel their anger. Have you ever seen a room full of grown adults suddenly jump up, nearly hitting their heads on the ceiling of your living room – screaming at the unknown men in uniforms on the television screen? Boxing, I think, is the height of satisfaction for a crowd loaded with anger.

People take an interest in violence in the news or in films. Some people resort to drinking to try to quell the anger within them. Then there's drugs. There are more people addicted to prescription drugs in our country than the number of people addicted to heroin.

One more extreme illustration of mismanaged anger. Social scientists, in the last few decades, have been careful to study individuals who turned out to be mass murderers. They found that their relatives and co-workers usually were genuinely shocked that the person went off the deep end and ended up killing several people. People who knew them, before their arrest, frequently testified how the killers were always “quiet likable guys who never said anything harsh – who sort of kept to themselves.”

They've identified three kinds of anger: rage, resentment and indignation.

Rage is uncontrolled and usually violent. Most Christians try to avoid it and get therapy if they can't.

Resentment is the anger that is repressed and it smolders and seeks revenge. Some people are carrying around a lot of resentment. Resentment is the one that turns against your own body and will kill you.

A third kind of anger is **indignation** – as in “righteous indignation” but it is a legitimate expression of love. You wouldn't become angry about

something if you didn't care. If you care, you have emotional investment.

Experts on anger tell us that the first task we have is to recognize our anger. We are angry for a reason. What is it?

It may be something a person has done to you in the past. It may be an ongoing oppression you feel in a present relationship. Whatever it is, all of us have feelings of anger somewhere within us to some extent. So we must realistically face the existence of our anger – facing the fact that we're angry.

The second task is to try to manage our anger rather than let it manage us. Easy to say but harder to do – but we always have a choice as to how we behave. We are responsible for each action we choose to do.

Let's look in the scriptural tradition to see if there is help in managing anger.



The **Old Testament** suggests prudence. Proverbs says that “fools are governed by their wrath” and advises that we avoid even being around angry people – to just stay out of their way to avoid trouble. Continually angry people are said to be like broken down cities without walls. All that is true, but still, what should we do to manage our anger?

The **New Testament** says “never take out vengeance, ... bear with one another charitably, forgiving whatever grievances we have against others.” And we say “Yes, ... but ...”

But there is some more help in Ephesians: “Be angry but don't sin.” It says: “Don't stay angry from one day to the next.” In other words, as Proverbs suggested: “Don't let the sun go down on your wrath.”

So amidst all the Bible verses on anger, it at least tells us to deal with it on the day of the provocation. But if we are not to vent rage and if we are not to repress it within us, (letting it turn to resentment and depression), how are we supposed to tell if we are angry for good reasons?

The writer Richard Walters describes righteous indignation. He says, indignation tries to identify a real

injustice. It prays, not plots. It points out a condition, not a person. It helps those who are mistreated. It teaches rather than destroys the offender. It is unselfish, somewhat reluctant and it refuses vengeance.

Walters suggests that sometimes we have to give our anger some **quick first aid**. When we are in an anger-provoking situation, we are not going to get out a list of characteristics of righteous indignation and thoughtfully study it. We've got to find some quick physical and emotional release to help us keep our behavior under control. We don't want to hurt others or ourselves. What we want to do is buy some time and settle down and let our minds gain control over our emotions.

① Sometimes it helps to plan to talk about it later but at a specific time. ② Doing something physical often helps us release tension and stress. All of us have channels to divert ourselves. By the time we reach our adult years, we've usually developed methods of release.

Some find release through music, art, sports, talking with a friend, exercise or work. Talking to God isn't bad either. If you've never expressed your anger to God, sometime try it.

David of the Bible did it. He frequently told God off for the unfairness of life. In one psalm, he told God that he hated God's enemies so much that he wished their kids would be smashed on the rocks. Now that's anger.

Some of us find first aid in writing things down. I've found angry feelings surface from deep within me when writing a short story.

Laughter is good first aid and obviously so is crying. Whatever release we use, the first aid that may immediately stop the emotional bleeding is to ask ourselves: what is the worst possible thing that could happen as a result of what makes us angry. That might calm us down a bit when the person ahead of us isn't aggressive enough to get us both through the traffic light before it changes. Perhaps ask, “Is my whole life going to end if I have to wait until the next light?”

During the first aid stage of dealing with our anger, we should remember two things. ① We shouldn't make important decisions while we feel

angry. And, ② we *shouldn't* try to change someone else. We can't change other people, we can only change ourselves.

The second stage of dealing with anger, **after the first aid, is to deal with it** – to resolve it. We honestly have to sit back, after we're calmed somewhat, and say to ourselves: "That really made me angry. There's a conflict and I must do something about it." Maybe an apology is needed to resolve something. Perhaps resolution will come when we forgive someone else.

I've personally found that when people offend me, my anger is resolved when I forgive them and remind myself that they are doing the best they know how and they really don't know any better. The hard work of resolving our anger comes in the work of communication. Most things have to be talked out and unless we sit down with someone and express our anger over what we consider to be unjust, our anger will stay within us and turn to resentment. Our ability to express our frustration in a conflict with another is directly related to what we think of ourselves.

The growth of our self-esteem is usually a life-long process. Building our self-esteem begins with our refusing to injure ourselves with our anger. We are children of God and we have enormous worth. We are created in the image of God. We do not have to be perfect and yet we do have value.

We are valuable enough that we should have as many of our needs met as possible. In order to raise our self-esteem and realize our true worth, we have to specifically determine what it is we need. Then we have to prioritize our needs to get a sense of how we are going to go about getting those needs met.

In one sense, we all need communication training. We also need anchors in the values that make us aware of our self-worth. In all of the assertiveness training materials is the basic task of realizing our own worth. When we are fully aware of our worth, we can more easily express our joys and frustrations because what happens, in our lives, matters – particularly because we consider ourselves loved children of God.

Now all this is complex. We live with whatever state in which we find our self-concepts, plus whatever the level of our communication abilities are with others. But the Church is about sharing our stories, sharing our pain and finding healing from one another. In Christian community, we discover God's power, within us, to conquer things we never dreamed we could overcome.

We all have anger and it is good that we do. Anger is good because it warns us that something is wrong. There are some things wrong with life and our anger is reminding us that we are alive and responsive to life – and that life matters. We're not drugged zombies out of touch with the world around us (although some people drive like they are).

Life matters. Anger is good because it can activate us to be more involved with life and to act.

So let anger be your friend. Don't be afraid of it but see it as a flag waiving to you – telling you that something is wrong. What we do about that wrong will make the difference. What we choose to do with ourselves can cause us to live **either** a creative and fulfilling life or a life of being a slave to our inner resentments that will someday be our undoing.² ■



² Richard Walters, *Anger: Your's, Mine & What To Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Zonderan, 1981) <R>G. Bach, H. Madow, *Anger, How To Recognize and Cope With It* (New York: Scribner's: 1972)

