

Anger: A Battle We Can Win

By Neil Earle

"The manifestations of the emotion of anger are so numerous that Dr. W.B. Cannon of Harvard required an entire printed page to merely list them," wrote Dr. John Schindler in *How to Live 365 Days a Year*. Those external manifestations are obvious: a red face, bloodshot eyes, stomach muscles squeezing down. But that is only half the story:

"The entire digestive tract becomes spastic, triggering severe abdominal pains. The heart rate goes up markedly...the coronary arteries squeeze down hard enough to produce angina or even a fatal coronary" (pages 25-26).

No wonder the Bible counsels: "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil" (Psalm 37:8). Yet we say: "Don't fret—in this day and age? Surely the Bible is kidding us." But wait! There's more: "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools" (Ecclesiastes 7:9). We reply: "But you don't understand. If you lived where I did you'd be stirred up too."

And the Bible replies, calmly, soothingly, like a mother's voice: "A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly" (Proverbs 14:29).

In spite of these excellent prescriptions from God's words, millions of us allow ourselves to get entangled with anger every day. Even our slang is dangerous: "She makes me sick!" He burns me up!" "I really blew my stack" and the coup de grace: "I could kill him!"

Overt anger/latent anger

This is serious, for bitter and hasty words are often emotional preparation for the most fearsome acts. Jesus had to severely correct two of his own disciples for a vindictive hot-tempered attitude towards a despised ethnic group (Luke 9:51-56).

A common misconception is that all anger is wrong. It isn't. Jesus himself got angry. He was angry when he cleared the money changers from the Temple (John 2:13-17). He was angry at the stubborn Pharisees in Matthew 23. But this was controlled anger. "In your anger do not sin," Paul taught, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26). But most anger we see about us today is sin. People blowing up after the drip-drop-drip of petty annoyances. Husbands retaliating at wives. Bosses "dumping" on their

subordinates. That is overt anger, easy to spot and—hopefully—possible to avoid.

There is also another kind of anger that comes from slow, simmering attitudes deep inside. This is latent anger and resentment, a festering kind of attitude that may take a long time coming to the surface. This is why Judas

Iscariot, with his critical, resentful spirit, was not suspected by the other disciples of harboring bitterness. Or why, in our time, apparently ordinary people, passed over for promotion or frustrated in some other way, bring a gun to work or school and go on a murdering rampage.

Anger is emotional preparation for murder. This is what Jesus labeled it (Matthew 5:21-22). The consequences can be hidden. “Depression at every phase of its development,” wrote neurologist Mortimer Ostow, “includes a component of anger, whether visible or invisible.” We all need help in navigating our way through the stresses and strains of a world tearing at us, a world seemingly designed to make us angry. Here are five principles that can help.

First

Pray fervently when we see bitterness and resentment rising up inside us. We can thank God for showing us our wrong thought patterns. Sin begins in the mind. That’s why we Christians are to renew our minds in Jesus Christ (Romans 12:2). That is a lifelong task. God the Holy Spirit will help us when we turn to him for help.

Second

Keep the big picture of human existence in mind. It’s always good to ask: Will this really matter 100 years from now? And what if our adversary died and we had a grudge on our conscience? What then? Peter gave good advice: “Whoever would love life and see good days...must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Peter 3:10-11).

Third

Try sincerely to see the other person’s point of view. This is empathy, and oh, how rare it is today! Consider our Great Example—Jesus Christ. What did it take to say, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), while they drove nails through his hands and feet? Meditating on this can leave us properly humbled and allow the fresh breezes of humility to cool the fires of anger.

Fourth

Pray for your adversary. Nothing is more diametrically opposite to the human spirit, is it? But it is our human spirit of anger and hostility that often gets us into so many scrapes. The apostle Paul wrote about the coals of fire treatment. Read it in Romans 12:20. Perhaps a simple card, a note, a sincere apology, a small gift or a simple resolve to treat the would-be opponent as a friend rather than an enemy could make all the difference in the world. Christians are not to retaliate in kind. They are learning to walk the hard and stony path that replaces evil with good. This is tough, but Jesus never said it would be easy, and he did offer help along the way.

Fifth

Keep our spiritual vision clear. In the midst of severe tensions and conflicts, when we are tempted to respond in kind, we must remember: God is the God of justice. God is on his throne and he has a way of evening things up, sometimes even in this life. The patriarch Joseph was a living example of this when he ended up with life-and-death power over the brothers who had sold him into slavery (Genesis 42:1-20).

God is our ultimate shelter against the tides of anger that threaten to engulf us. Jesus, our Peace, lives in us, and with that assurance, our victory over anger is a sure thing.