

It's OK to Be Angry

Anger in itself is not sin. But it can give rise to dangerous emotions that hinder our walk with God.

☒ Your body temperature rises, and your heart flutters rapidly. Your hands jitter. Your mouth becomes dry. Sweat beads up on your forehead. Are you getting sick? Not necessarily. You may be getting angry.

Anger is something we all experience. No matter how patient a person you are, no matter how closely you walk with God, you will still get angry. Moses, the prophet Jonah and even king David all got angry. You can live in the most perfect house in the most peaceful village and be surrounded by the most caring friends, and you will still get angry.

But did you know it is not a sin to be angry? The Bible says that when the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus, “he looked at them in anger” (Mark 3:5, NIV). Anger cannot be inherently sinful because Jesus got angry but He was also sinless. David expressed this truth when he wrote the admonition, “Be angry, and do not sin” (Ps. 4:4, NKJV).

Even God the Father experiences the emotion of anger. We read of “the anger of the Lord” no fewer than 18 times in the Old Testament. In fact, it seems God was almost always mad about something, and, in fact, Psalm 7:11 tells us He gets angry with the wicked every single day.

Our anger is sometimes justified, just as God's is. When the poor are mistreated, when the pride of racism threatens our progress, when the powerful take advantage of the weak, when politicians sacrifice their consciences on the altar of public opinion, and when the culture bombards our children at every turn with immoral images and behavior, we should be shaken with holy indignation.

But that doesn't mean we get a free pass to be angry whenever we want, however we want, with whomever we feel deserves it. Aristotle said, "Anybody can become angry; that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way; that is not within everyone's power, and that is not easy."

He was right. Though anger may not be evil in itself, it is only one letter short of "danger"—so we must learn to manage it.

If you have ever had a friend betray you or a spouse walk out on you or a family member embarrass you in front of people you respect, then you know that managing anger is not easy. But it is possible. We run into trouble not so much when we experience anger but when we run into the evil spawn hiding in the belly of this dangerous emotion.

Anger's Unstable Son

The Merritts have tempers; we can't deny it. If we are not careful, a simple moment of disagreement in our home can quickly escalate into a very intense and heated argument. Having become aware of this, our family has learned to be watchful and avoid falling prey to anger's unstable son, "Temper."

Temper is anger's type-A eldest son. If Temper is in the room, you can bet he is looking for a chance to get in the middle of even the most harmless situations. And you can never let your guard down. Just when you think he is gone for good, he will drop by unannounced and overstay his welcome.

The Bible gives us two good reasons not to lose our tempers. First, it is unwise. King Solomon said, "Short-tempered people do foolish things" (Prov. 14:17, NLT).

We all have experienced the truth of this statement. Giving

our anger full vent often causes us to yell or scream at others, insulting and wounding them. In a moment we can destroy long-lasting relationships.

Second, it may have serious consequences. Proverbs tells us, "A hot-tempered person starts fights" (15:18). When you lose your temper, you can become aggressive and hurt others physically. There are people who are on death row at this very moment because they lost their tempers.

If you struggle with your temper as we do, there's no perfect formula that will prevent you from ever losing control again. But we can tell you what helps us.

Take a breather. One of the actions you can take that is most likely to rescue you in a tense situation is also one of the hardest to do: Walk away. Simply remove yourself from the situation and catch your breath before you address the problem at hand. The more calm you are, the more clearly you will see how to handle it.

Learn to let go. Scripture tells us that it is to our benefit to "overlook a transgression" (Prov. 19:11, NKJV). Receiving the grace to forgive and forget even when you are the one who has been wronged is an invaluable skill that will earn you the respect and friendship of others. It will also save you the trouble of having to repent from giving your temper free reign and hurting someone else.

"I am not responsible for the attitudes of the people who are against me," Les Parrott wrote in an article in *New Man* magazine titled "Taming the Incredible Hulk" (Mar/Apr 2001). "I am only responsible for me."

The way we remember this principle in our family is by reminding one another, "It's not just how you act; it's how you react." Even though we cannot control the actions of those around us, we must strive to always respond in a way that

honors Christ.

Ultimately, temper is a Holy Spirit issue. Remember that if you are a Christian the Holy Spirit is living inside you. He speaks to you, watches over you and empowers you to overcome life's most insurmountable problems.

One of the fruits of His life in you is self-control (see Gal. 5:16-26). When you lose your temper, you take the Holy Spirit out of the equation. You allow your emotions to rule you instead of being ruled by the power of God inside you.

Anger's Destructive Daughter

Have you ever seen kudzu? It is a climbing, vinelike plant native to East Asia that spreads like wildfire and has found a home in the Deep South of the United States, where we live.

It is incredibly aggressive, taking over everything it touches—abandoned fields, roadside trees, telephone poles, entire buildings. If kudzu ever creeps onto your property, you can't rid yourself of it without an atomic bomb.

Anger's destructive daughter, Bitterness, is similar to kudzu. You can tell she's influencing you if you're feeling resentful because someone has wronged you or life hasn't gone your way. Like the tenacious plant, the root of bitterness needs little soil, requires a minimum of cultivation, grows quickly and is very difficult to remove. And if it takes root in your life, don't bother trying to hide it—a bitter root always bears bitter fruit.

It doesn't take a prophet to predict that many of you reading this article are full of bitterness. You may be bitter at a boss who fired you when you thought he was your friend. You may be bitter at a business partner who took advantage of you and your investment. Perhaps you are bitter at a parent who abused you or at God because He allowed a tragedy into your life.

People who are bitter exhibit telltale signs—a hardness in their faces, slumping shoulders, negative conversation. It is miserable to be around people who suffer from this sickness.

Bitterness initiates a response that is the opposite of displays of temper. Whereas temper causes you to give your anger full vent, bitterness grows when you bottle anger up inside you.

Whenever you feel indignant, you are faced with a threefold choice. You can release your indignation in a Christ-honoring way; you can release it in an uncontrolled, sinful way; or you can bottle it up and let it sour and spoil inside you.

Anger is a powerful reaction, but bitterness is equally powerful and even more destructive. As Jerry Bridges put it in his book *The Practice of Godliness*, “Resentment, bitterness, and self-pity build up inside our hearts and eat away at our spiritual lives like a slowly spreading cancer.”

Like acid, bitterness can destroy the vessel where it is being stored. It will depress you and cause you to destroy both yourself and others with complete abandon.

Anger and bitterness both draw their water from the same emotional well—they come from the same bloodline. In one case the emotion can be pure and healthy while in the other case it is polluted and poisonous.

Let me explain. As we have said, anger is sometimes right and justified, but bitterness is always sinful and unjustified. Indeed, the Scriptures allow anger (see Eph. 4:26), while bitterness is universally condemned (Heb. 12:15).

In order to defeat bitterness, you have to go after it. Remember that bitterness is a root that grows underground, and you must find it and dig it up as you would a root, to get rid of it. This can be a difficult process, so it might help to

break it into three easy steps.

Face it. You will never conquer bitterness unless the problem is acknowledged. Ever wonder why we read so much about confession in Scripture? It's because the only way a disease can ever be healed and removed is by first acknowledging its presence.

Replace it. With the help of the Holy Spirit bitterness must be replaced with forgiveness. The balm of forgiveness is the only medicine that will heal the sore of bitterness. Nothing else—revenge, spite or retaliation—will do it.

Erase it. That is what forgiveness allows you to do—move on as you replace bitterness with the love, mercy and forgiveness that you have received from God. Remember that no matter how badly or unfairly you have been treated by someone, that person is no more guilty than you are of sending Jesus to the cross.

Yet as He was dying, Jesus was able to pray the ultimate prayer of forgiveness, “‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do’” (Luke 23:34).

According to legend, when Leonardo da Vinci was painting *The Last Supper*, he had an intense argument with a fellow painter that he never resolved. Fuming and bitter, da Vinci came up with a devious plan to get his enemy back.

He decided to paint the man's face as the face of Judas Iscariot so it would be captured for all time. When people came to look at his work in progress, they immediately knew who “Judas” was, and da Vinci got great pleasure out of portraying this man as a villain.

Continuing his work, he came to the face he had saved for the very end: the face of Jesus. But da Vinci drew a mental blank. He could not paint a thing.

Finally, he realized that the trouble was he had painted the face of his enemy as the face of Judas Iscariot. His bitterness was keeping him from seeing the face of Christ. Da Vinci went back to the image of Judas and painted a nebulous, unknown face over his enemy's. Then he went to the painter and asked for forgiveness before returning to finish one of the world's greatest portraits.

True or not, this story points out an important reality: It is up to the individual afflicted with it to bring about an end to bitterness. Hebrews 12:14 tells us to "pursue peace with all people." The word "pursue" means "to go after in an aggressive fashion."

As Christians, we are to take the initiative to bring about peace. You must be the one to mend the broken fences, rebuild the bridges and restore the relationships that have been destroyed by bitterness.

Free to Worship

Did you know that resolving your anger is an important precursor to worship? Jesus told His disciples: "'If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come offer your gift'" (Matt. 5:23-24). He implies that reconciliation is so important that you should drop what you are doing even if you are in church and go get right with others.

Are you tired of dressing the wounds of your temper and tasting the sour reflux of bitterness? Decide right now not to let other people determine how you are going to act. Instead, let the Holy Spirit take control of your life and consecrate the emotion of anger for His glory. With the power of God, you can defeat anger's evil offspring.

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COOL YOUR ANGER

Is it hard for you to stop your anger from heating up? Go to for Scriptures that will help you control it.