

Why Many Christians Unwittingly Poison Their Hearts

“Do not be quick in your spirit to be angry, for irritation settles in the bosom of fools” (Eccl. 7:9).

There are only a few rules in our house that every one of our kids should be able to repeat. One of them is written as part of a kids’ version of 1 Corinthians 13 on a chalkboard in our kitchen. It states “Love ...does not have tantrums.” The rule is “No tantrums.”

I guess it makes sense when you have four kids under the age of 10.

The challenge of tantrums, however, is not restricted to those under 10 years of age. I am an Englishman and a naturalized American, and last year in both my native land and my adopted land, we experienced some of the most polarizing political votes I have ever endured.

The polarization of ideologies and beliefs is growing.

It is dividing communities and even families. The anger is growing and spilling out onto social media channels, onto our streets and university campuses. Many joked last year that they were dreading the communal Thanksgiving or Christmas meals because they wanted to avoid the possibility of angry exchanges. I have heard numerous accounts of people quitting social media because they couldn’t emotionally handle the blood-boiling conversations taking place on that platform.

I want to suggest the problem is deeper than large political ideologies, a family dinner or a social media platform (although I do believe that sometimes the structure of social

media platforms exacerbates the issues).

When “Venting” Doesn’t Work

The challenge of frustration, anger and offense (and ensuing bitterness) is found between co-workers in the office place.

It is found on the university campus when another student or a faculty member says something insulting or which we think is outrageous.

It is found in church communities when a pastor or a leader offends us with words (whether intentional or not) that are hurtful, controlling or just plain unfair.

It is found even in our deepest relationships; we find ourselves getting deeply frustrated and even bitter at the irritations of our spouse’s behavior.

So many of these situations are nuanced and need wise responses, but I want to suggest that in all these situations as followers of Jesus we do not have the “right” to be angry. We may not melt down in the middle of Trader Joe’s, but when we are faced with seeming outrages, the “No Tantrum” rule is just as applicable to a 25-year-old and a 65-year-old as to a 5-year-old.

We may be opposed to the idea of children having tantrums but be perfectly OK with venting ourselves. After all, surely it’s better to get it off your chest than to bottle it up? While I agree that we need to process our emotions in a right way, venting and “getting it off your chest” usually ends up with you embedding poison in your own heart that can last for years as a bitter residue.

What about “Righteous” Anger and Jesus in the Temple?

I believe there is a common misconception about anger. Most people think it is generally a bad thing, but if it is

“righteous” anger, i.e. against sin, then that anger can be channeled and used for great effect to bring about good. The challenge is that anger against sin is invariably against somebody else’s sin. Equating Jesus’ righteous outburst in the temple against money traders in the outer court with our anger against other injustices is usually not helpful. First, we are not without sin (Jesus was), and second, we are typically not angry about Israel forsaking one of her primary mandates in the Jerusalem temple. Simply put, God does have righteous anger; we do not. I believe that is why James reminds his readers that “the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (James 1:20).

I am not saying that annoying or frustrating circumstances, people or social media posts will not come your way; they will certainly come. I am saying that as believers, we need to learn to let go of our anger and quickly. Paul’s treatment of this subject is instructive. In his letter to the Ephesians, he recognizes that anger will come, but sees it as it is—a harmful, radioactive emotion. “‘Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Eph. 4:26). As humans, we simply cannot manage anger. Get rid of it as soon as you can. Just a few verses later, he makes it crystal-clear—“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, outbursts, and blasphemies, with all malice, be taken away from you” (Eph. 4:31).

I want to encourage us to act as prophetic ministers of another kingdom. I don’t believe we, as followers of Christ, have a right to get angry. Yet in an age of increasing anger, is it possible that a community of believers can refuse to conform to the spirit of the age and minister the peace of that kingdom to all around? I certainly hope so. {eo}

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