

Cleansing the Temple

Putting Anger into Perspective

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Then Jesus went into the Temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple. [He] overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

Matthew 21:12 NKJV

I have had many pastors tell me that Jesus was not angry when he overturned the tables at the Temple. I don't know why they have a problem with this. After all, Jesus was human at the time and anger is a human emotion. Is it so hard to believe that at least once in his entire ministry Jesus would feel this emotion? Furthermore, is anger necessarily a bad thing? It can *lead* to bad things, of course, like rage, resentment and violence, but it can also prompt us to stand up for ourselves and make badly needed changes like Jesus was doing.

Regardless of whether it is good or bad, anger is with us to stay and I think it is time we put it into perspective.

There are three types of people when it comes to anger. The internalizer, who suppresses anger out of shame; the loose canon, who loses control of it; and the centered person who handles it in a sensible way.

The internalizers are Christians who are convinced, despite the gospel of grace, that we have to earn God's love by being perfect. For them this means they must never be angry. They try desperately to hide it. They internalize it. They get angry with themselves rather than be angry with others. They flagellate themselves emotionally. They let the stress of trying to hide and/or suppress their anger affect their health. They hold themselves up to such a high standard that they make it impossible for the love of Christ to warm their souls.

These internalizers are usually predisposed, by temperament, to suppress anger, but they are also taught to do this by their parents and those who influence their upbringing. This is especially true of children growing up in a dysfunctional home. Young child in such a situation learn quickly how to stay safe. If hiding their anger keeps the family from erupting, many children readily comply. Soon, they become ashamed of their anger and learn to "stuff" it. When these children grow up, and have more control over their environment, they must make peace with their anger. They must understand that the emotion, isolated from any kind of acting out, is nothing to be ashamed of. They must allow themselves to feel their anger before surrendering it to the Holy Spirit.

Loose canons may, or may not, be ashamed of their anger, but they have no ability to control it. Cain was a loose canon. (*Genesis 4:5*) He took what he perceived as God's rejection and turned it into violence. We all have a loose canon in our lives. If not, we certainly see them in the news and everywhere around us. Loose canons blow up when things do not go their way. They tend to be controllers and this is how they intimidate others. Or they have a lot of emotional baggage that keeps them on edge all the time. Stress quickly leads to anger, then rage, and, sometimes, violence. Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, explains what happens physiologically to the person who loses his temper. An event, that would normally be processed by the neocortex (the thinking part of our brain) triggers a reaction in the amygdala (the brain's storehouse of emotional memory). This bypassing of the neocortex makes loose canons unable to think through their reaction to events around them before they act. They act first and think later. Loose canons need to learn how to process their anger before acting on it.

Centered people (the ideal Christians) are not ashamed of anger. When they feel it they process it rather than act on it. They put it into perspective. Some do this more quickly than others, but they all do it. How do you process anger? Well, if you are angry at a situation that needs changing, and it can be changed, then channel your anger in a positive way. This usually means doing something positive in a well-thought-out manner. If you are angry about a situation over which you have no control, then try the following:

- Pray for God to lift the anger.
- Visualize yourself surrendering the anger to God.
- Visualize God's pure love filling you up and pushing aside the anger.
- Write about your anger on a piece of paper and then put it in your anger box.
- Talk to a trusted friend, counselor or pastor.
- While you are waiting for the anger to be lifted, pray that God gives you the strength *not* to act on it.
- If you are angry at a person, pray for him or her every day for three weeks.
- If you have the courage, do something nice for this person.
- The Bible tells us what to do with anger, so refresh your memory by reading *Matthew 5: 23* (being "reconciled to your brother" before going to the altar), and *Matthew 5:44* (loving your enemy). Then read about the crucifixion of Christ and ask yourself what you have to be angry about.
- No matter how long the anger lingers, do not stop praying; do not act on it; do not shame yourself.

These thoughts about anger could easily be applied to some of the other seven deadly sins—the ones that refer to emotions—pride, envy, lust, anger. I cannot stress enough that, in my opinion, we must allow ourselves to feel these emotions without shame and yet, at the same time, nip them in the bud using prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit.