

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD

Uprooting Anger

“An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression.” —*Proverbs 29:22*

The Acceptable Sin

As Robert Jones observes, “Anger is a universal problem, prevalent in every culture, experienced in every generation. No one is isolated from its presence or immune from its poison. It permeates each person and spoils our most intimate relationships. Anger is a given part of our fallen human fabric. Sadly this is true even in our Christian homes and churches” (*Uprooting Anger*, 13). In fact, so common is this vice that Jerry Bridges identifies it as one of the “respectable sins” many Christians openly tolerate (see chapters 15-16 in his book, *Respectable Sins*).

What is anger? Simply stated, *anger* can be defined as **“our whole-personed active response of negative moral judgment against perceived evil”** (Jones, *Uprooting Anger*, 15). According to this definition, anger involves five components (see 15-17):

- (1) It is an *active response*. Anger is not a product of one’s genetic makeup. It is not a subconscious or passive personality trait. As Jones states, “Anger is something we *do*, not something we *have*” (15).
- (2) It is a *whole-personed response*. Anger is not merely a feeling. It always involves the exercise of the mind, will, emotions, beliefs, and motives. It is an intentional response of the whole person. “Angry people respond with their whole being—their thoughts, emotions, affections, words, actions, etc.—to people they perceive to be wrong or harmful to their own interests” (24).
- (3) It is a response *evoked by an internal cause*. Most confuse the cause of anger with external things like a careless driver, a cold meal, the tardiness of a coworker, or a belligerent spouse. But these are only *secondary causes*. The ultimate cause lies within the angry person himself: his desires and expectations. “The root of anger lies in unsatisfied ruling ‘I-wantsies,’ unmet demands, and fallen heart-idols. Cravings cause conflicts” (57).
- (4) It is a response to a *perceived evil*. Anger identifies a person, act, or thing as a moral evil. It manifests what a person truly believes about right and wrong; it reveals a person’s fundamental moral code. Anger is exercised—whether internally or externally—when a person assumes *the role of judge*.
- (5) It is a *negative moral judgment*. Anger does not stop with identifying a person, act, or thing as evil. It always involves pronouncing condemnation on that perceived evil. It insists that some form of consequence is necessary, and this consequence can be inflicted subtly (a cold shoulder, the silent treatment, slanderous thoughts) or openly (a harsh word, profanity, an act of violence).

Many Christians tolerate anger as a normal part of life by justifying it as “righteous anger.” Indeed, there is such a thing, for **God Himself is a God of anger**. Nahum 1:2 states, “A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies.” Proverbs itself alludes to this attribute of God (**11:23; 24:18**).

However, it is important to define “righteous wrath” before making assumptions about the validity of one’s anger. Jerry Bridges summarizes the issue well:

Some people justify their anger as righteous anger. They feel they have a right to be angry, given a certain situation. How, then, can I know if my anger is righteous anger? First, righteous anger arises from an accurate perception of true evil—that is, as a violation of God’s moral law. It focuses on God and His will, not on me and my will. Second, righteous anger is always self-controlled. It never causes one to lose his temper or retaliate in some vengeful way. Though the Bible does give some examples of righteous anger . . . they are few. The main focus of the Bible’s teaching on anger deals with our sinful anger, our sinful reaction to other people’s actions or words. (*Respectable Sins*, 118)

Righteous anger is rare. Indeed, most of the Bible's teaching on anger—when describing human anger—is *negative*. James sums it up when he writes, “**the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God**” (James 1:20). Unrighteous anger is one of the most vivid illustrations of depravity and continues to be one of the chief problems with which believers struggle as they battle their unredeemed flesh. The challenge of biblical sanctification—of growing in wisdom—is not mere anger “management” but anger “mortification” and anger “purification.”

Since the book of Proverbs is about skillful living, it naturally instructs its readers in a right perspective regarding anger. A survey of the book yields at least **five lessons about anger and its dangers**.

1. Anger is a distinguishing mark of a fool.

Proverbs defines anger as the calling card of a fool. In particular, Proverbs points to the fool's quickness to express anger, his abandonment of reason and constraint in the midst of anger, and the shame he incurs through the public displays of his temper.

- **12:16** – “A fool's anger is known at once, but a prudent man conceals dishonor.”
- **14:16-17; 19:3; 20:3; 26:17; 29:11**; see also Ecclesiastes 7:9; Galatians 5:19-21; James 4:1-3.

As in other areas of his life, the fool abandons the discipline of his thoughts, desires, and emotions. He is, as Proverbs **25:28a** states, “*Like a city that is broken into and without walls.*” He may have vast intelligence and unusual skill, yet all of this is left defenseless to the ruinous nature of sinful anger.

“Freudian ventilation is the sin of a fool. Counselors who advise it are propagating sin and foolishness. The solution to anger is self-control (cf. Galatians 5:23). It is not ventilation.”
—Jay Adams, *Proverbs*, 216-17

2. Anger is devastating to relationships.

One of the chief consequences of anger is *strife*. As Longman simply states, “Anger destroys familial and community relationships” (*Proverbs*, 550). While a fool will take out his wrath on complete strangers, those who are closest to him most often are the victims of his wrath. The blood of Abel vividly testifies to this reality (see Gen 4:1-10).

- **10:12** – “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.”
- **6:16-19; 15:18; 16:28; 19:13; 21:9; 21:19; 26:21; 27:15; 29:22; 30:32-33**

An angry person is often able to hide his sin problem from strangers and even friends. But he cannot hide it from his own family. Sinful anger—on the part of a husband or a wife—poses one of if not *the* greatest threat to the health and wellbeing of marriages and families.

3. Anger is a necessary cause for disassociation.

Since anger is so corrosive to relationships and so antithetical to wisdom, Proverbs calls upon the wise to distance themselves from those who give themselves over to it. This warning reflects one of the important “laws” of godly wisdom—the “**law of assimilation**” (for good or for bad, we assimilate the convictions, attitudes, and behaviors of those with whom we closely associate). In the same way Proverbs exhorts its readers to associate with the wise so as to share in their benefits, it exhorts its readers to disassociate with angry men so as to avoid their penalties.

- **19:18-19; 22:24-25**; see also Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10-11.

Sin is contagious, and sinful anger especially so. Social distancing from the angry man is essential.

4. Anger is treated with great caution by the wise.

Anger is not inherently sinful. One of the most repeated statements in the Old Testament is that the LORD is “slow to anger” (Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3). Those who strive to reflect His moral perfections will also reflect righteous, sanctified anger. How is this done? Robert Jones (*Uprooting Anger*, 29-30) lists three criteria:

- 1) *Righteous anger reacts against actual sin.* It is not angry over something merely perceived as sin, or over something defined as sin by man. It is not angry over inconveniences, discomforts, or hurt feelings. Instead, it reacts against sin that is identified as such by divine revelation.
- 2) *Righteous anger focuses on God and His kingdom, rights, and concerns.* It is focused on and concerned about God and His glory, not man and his dignity or reputation.
- 3) *Righteous anger expresses itself with godly qualities and in godly manners.* The one who is righteously angry maintains control of his thoughts, desires, and emotions. He uses words that are true and honorable. He expresses indignation in manners that are not sinful. In expressing his anger over real sin he does not commit other sins (see Ephesians 4:26).

Because there is real evil in this world, a wise man can and will express anger. But he will do so always with great caution—taking steps to ensure that the remaining folly in his life will not hijack this righteous response to iniquity and turn it into just another opportunity for evil.

- **15:18** – “A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but the slow to anger calms a dispute.”
- **14:29; 16:32; 17:27; 19:11; 25:15**; see also James 1:19

It is noteworthy that the phrase, “slow to anger,” is used outside of Proverbs in the OT always to refer to the LORD. In all its occurrences in Proverbs (4x), it refers to the wise man. Like the One he fears, the wise man will be *slow to anger*. Waltke states, “The patient person is relaxed when wronged; he controls his emotions to think and act according to piety and ethics. He is not ‘ruffled or goaded’ into overreacting to avenge himself or seek revenge rather than trusting the LORD. He is like God” (*Proverbs 1-15*, 605). Such patient and disciplined anger is not natural. It must be cultivated using the means of grace God provides.

Proverbs takes a relatively positive view of the exercise of anger on the part of the king. As one of God’s delegated agents for meting out retributive justice, it is necessary for a good leader to exhibit “a whole-personed active response of negative moral judgment against perceived evil” (see 14:35; 19:12; 20:2; 24:24-25). Certainly, this authority to express anger is often abused, and the higher one is in a position of power, the more detrimental his unrighteous anger will be (see 28:15; 29:2; cf. Matthew 20:25-26).

5. Anger is to be quelled, not provoked.

Sinful anger is easily provoked in sinful men; their buttons are easily pushed. Not only does the book of Proverbs warn the wise man about this reality, it also instructs him in how to quell it in others. To have this ability to bring calm to situations in which tensions are escalating is a unique and praiseworthy skill.

- **15:1** – “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
- **12:18; 15:1, 18; 16:14; 25:15; 29:8**

The ability to deescalate tensions requires **the skillful use of words** (see “Speaking Truth,” 11/18/2021). After all, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (18:21), and this certainly pertains to quieting a quarrel. The wise man must actively harness the power of words to bring peace and tranquility to his surroundings. In other cases, **silence** is the best option. In yet other situations, **waiting for the apropos time** to speak and **listening first** are essential.

- **10:19; 15:28; 17:14, 27; 18:13; 21:23; 29:9**

Yet even though wise men are tasked with bringing peace into the midst of tension, their failure to act or their lack of skill is never justification for the continuance of the strife. Indeed, anger can be provoked, and when it arises it should be quieted. But even when provocation is present and wise men are not, the responsibility for the anger rests solely on the hothead. He has no excuse. As Jerry Bridges states, “In facing up to our anger, we need to realize that no one else *causes* us to be angry. Someone else’s words or actions may become the occasion of our anger, but the cause lies deep within us—usually our pride, or selfishness, or desire to control” (*Respectable Sins*, 119).

Some Final Counsel

How does the believer “cease from anger” and “put it away” (Psalm 37:8; Ephesians 4:32-32; Colossians 3:8)? Robert Jones (*Uprooting Anger*, 88-94) provides a helpful summary of the steps needed for the mortification of sinful anger:

1. Repent of the evil desires that produce angry behavior and receive God’s forgiving, enabling grace.
2. Own responsibility for your angry behavior and identify it as evil before the Lord.
3. Confess and renounce your angry behavior before God and others.
4. Believe anew in Christ and his gospel promises to angry people.
5. Commit yourself to taking active, concrete steps to replace your angry behavior with Christ-like words and actions.
6. Establish and carry out a workable temptation plan.
 - a) Avoid unnecessary occasions that tempt you to show anger.
 - b) Remove yourself when possible, as quickly as possible, from explosive situations.
 - c) In the midst of temptation, ask Christ for strength and recite key verses or biblical truths you have memorized.
 - d) Enlist mature believers to pray for you, counsel you, hold you accountable, and be available during and after crises.
 - e) Keep a log or journal of personal anger incidents.
7. Continue to prayerfully study Scripture, and Scripture-based resources, on relevant topics.

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day. Memorize Proverbs 14:29.
- Take an extraordinary step of self-examination this week. Read through the proverbs listed under headings 1-2 above. As you meditate upon them, ask the Lord to convict you over the sinful anger that exists in your life.
- Identify the circumstances in which you most often fall into sinful anger. Identify also the people against whom you lash out in your anger. Repent of these sins and confess them openly to God.
- Why is reflecting on and reaffirming belief in the gospel so important for mortifying sinful anger?
- In place of anger in these specific circumstances and against these specific people, what must you as a believer “put on” instead? What concrete steps will you take to do that?
- List several examples from Scripture of the expression of righteous anger. How and when can such anger be expressed today?
- Consider the testimony of the Apostle Paul summarized in 1 Timothy 1:12-17. What does this say about God’s power to save angry men?

Recommended Reading:

- Robert D. Jones, *Uprooting Anger: Biblical Help for a Common Problem*. P&R, 2005.
- Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*. NavPress, 2007. See chapters 15 & 16.

Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: May 12 – “Acquiring Respect”