

How to Deal with Your Anger

"I really never get angry," declared Mary Lou. Mike said, "My anger gives me a great deal of power; people are afraid of me." Juan lamented, "I know I shouldn't get angry. I say and do things I regret later. My anger makes me feel guilty." Cynthia commented, "I can't help myself when I get angry. Some people can control their anger, but not me."

Anger has many faces. Some deny it, others use it, some are plagued by it, and others controlled by it. In spite of its many faces anger is still a natural and normal part of our emotional makeup. Everyone gets angry. It is an automatic reaction to being offended, whether that offense is real or imagined. Anger produces an emotional agitation, but here is where it often goes undetected. The emotional agitation may occur at a conscious level, or it may be experienced at an unconscious level, but it is the normal reaction to anger. This "emotional agitation" will seek expression. Dr. Dwight Carlson in his excellent book "Overcoming Hurts and Anger", explains, "anger... will seek expression in some sort of aggressive, defensive, or destructive manner to oneself or others."

The interesting, and important insight provided by the Bible is that anger is not wrong, or bad in and of itself. In fact, at times it is wrong if we do not become angry and offended. A clear illustration of this fact is that in 375 occasions in the Old Testament when anger is used it refers to the anger of God. On certain occasions it is clear that Jesus did not hide his anger. But there are also clear occasions in the Bible where people became angry, and it was wrong. The issue is not whether anger is good or bad, rather the Bible gives us the keen insight, and the practical one, that anger is neutral; it is neither right nor wrong. It is what the anger is based on and how the anger is expressed that determines whether it is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, destructive or constructive.

The question which we are then faced with is not whether to be angry or not to be angry, but will we handle our anger or will it handle us? Anger has many faces, but the bottom line is always the same—will we deal with it or will it deal with us?

Here are some solid biblical principles for handling your anger:

Do A Self-Inventory

First, the Bible teaches that when angry we can avoid its ill-effects if we first do a self-inventory. "In your anger do not sin...search your hearts and be silent" (Psalms 4:4). Don't let your anger explode at someone else, but allow it to cue you to ask yourself some honest questions: Who am I really angry with? What have I done to contribute to this situation? What is my appropriate responsibility and response? It is so easy to aim our anger at innocent victims, and after blowing them away to excuse ourselves of any responsibility. It is never easy to look squarely at our own responsibility and own it, but if we are to be successful in relationships it is a necessity. It is not uncommon to be angry at one's self and then to take it out on someone else. Self-inventory puts us on the right road. After all there is really only one person whom we each can change and that person, of course, is ourselves. "In your anger do not sin... search your hearts and be silent."

Learn to Master It

Second, in the biblical incident of Cain and Abel. God warns Cain that because of his anger sin is standing by his door. God asks Cain, "Why are you angry?" (Gen. 4:6). This reflects our first principle of self-inventory, but God instructs Cain, "...it desires to have you, but you must master it" (4:7). The idea is simple and clear-cut but not easy--get control of your anger.

The first step in this task is to identify your anger. Anger, as was pointed out earlier, has many faces. There are four helpful categories of identification: known anger, hidden anger, blind anger, unknown anger. "Known" is the anger of which we are aware, and the others around us are also aware of it. Everyone knows we are angry. "Hidden" is the anger we know about but hide from others. They never know we are angry. "Blind" is anger others see, but we do not see in ourselves. We are blind to our own anger. Someone may ask, "why are you angry?" The exploding response is, "I'm not angry!" "Unknown," the most serious and most difficult to deal with, is anger which has been denied and repressed to the degree that neither people around us nor we, ourselves are aware of it. It is anger buried in our subconsciousness, but it surfaces in physical and emotional symptoms from ulcers to hives, from a nervous twitch to a cutting critical tongue. The first task of mastering your anger is to identify it. Ask yourself and those who know you best some basic questions. What kind of anger do I have? Can you see it? What are the feelings I am having? Is it anger? Why am I acting this way? Is it because of anger? What is my most common behavior when I become angry? (Some are violent, others silent, others verbal, some profane, some withdraw, others attack.) Identify your anger. You must recognize your anger to master it.

The second step of mastering your anger is a decision. You must decide whether you are seriously going to deal with it or not. Cain decided against dealing with it, and forever his name will live in history because of his decision. It

is a truism that if we do not deal with our anger, it will deal with us. Our real choice is only between being victim or master. There is no middle ground. The next two principles will provide some help in further mastering our anger.

Slow It Down

Our third biblical principle comes from the New Testament. "...Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger..." (Jas. 1:19). Anger is a powerful emotion. If allowed to explode like a race horse from a starting gate, it, like the race horse, is difficult to catch; so slow down the reaction from your anger. There are the practical suggestions like count to 10 before saying or doing anything. It is better to walk out on a conversation than let your anger explode point blank. Call a "time out" on the discussion, if you identify it kindling your anger to the danger level. Take a walk. Inform the other person "let's change the subject, I'm reacting more strongly than I want to this subject. We can come back to it later." Ask yourself, what is happening here? Why this reaction? Do some self-inventory. What is the other person saying? Am I understanding them correctly? Is their reaction triggering a reaction in me? Bite your tongue (figuratively). Choose your words. Take five deep breaths. The point is you must make the decision to slow your anger down and not allow it to explode. Listen to your feelings, but do not be controlled by your feelings.

Don't Stay Angry

Fourth, "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down, while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph. 4:26-27). Don't stay angry. Some people never forget an offense. They harbor grudges. The result is what the Bible calls a "root of bitterness" (Heb. 12:15). It grows and grows causing nothing but trouble and touching many, many lives. Again, those who do not deal with their anger, their anger will deal with them. Never let your anger be prolonged for more than the day. Resolve the conflict. Start building the bridges of reconciliation. Make the apology. Own up to the contribution you made to the conflict. Forgive the other person. Release your anger, but point it in a safe direction. Even talk it over with an uninvolved party. Turn it over to God. He can handle it, and in turn, He will exchange it for His grace. Such is always our privilege when we have Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. "Harboring our anger isolates us, corrupts us, and who likes to be around an angry person. No, harboring anger and vengeance is always a losers game. Let it go. Else it leads down a road scared by a critical, insensitive tongue. It causes us to stumble into the pock marks and craters of bitterness. It sours every joy of life which we would desire to taste.

Here are some of God's principles for handling your anger: Do a self-inventory, learn to master it, slow it down, and don't stay angry. Wrap these all in a daily routine of conversation with God. Invite Him to help. Pray for yourself and those with who you are in conflict. And learn to be patient as God begins that

change process within you. When you blow it ask for His forgiveness and the forgiveness of the one you offended. Then go on. As you practice these principles you still probably won't handle your anger perfectly, but you will handle it better. The longer you condition yourself and allow God to condition you the better you'll handle your anger. So don't put it off get started today.