

## **Righteous and Unrighteous Anger**

Anger meets us throughout the Bible. Cain's anger precipitated his murder of Abel (Gen. 4:3-8). Jacob cursed the cruel and destructive violent anger of his sons Simeon and Levi (49:7). Saul's anger was kindled by David's popularity (1 Sam. 18:8). Jonah was angered that Yahweh had not destroyed Ninevah (Jon. 4:4). Herodias, Herod's wife, was angered by John the Baptists' bold and pointed preaching so much so that she plotted his death (Mark 6:19) When Jesus announced in the synagogue of Nazareth His Messiahship the Jews became so furious they drove him out of town and tried to execute him (Lu. 4:28f). In fact when one begins to trace the trail of anger through the Bible its history is not only ugly but also cruel, destructive, and bloody.

It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul identifies fits of rage (Gal. 5:20), anger, and wrath (Col. 3:8) as acts of the sinful nature, and these we are instructed to "put to death" for those who practice such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Jesus announced, "anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Mt. 5:22). Such forceful condemnation of anger would seem to state clearly that anger is a sin, and therefore, we are not to become angry.

But the whole story has not yet been told for out of the 455 times that anger is used in the Old Testament 375 of those are references to God's anger. Jesus seems to cleanse the temple in a state of anger, and his "zeal" is prophetically approved (Jn. 2:13-17). The Pharisee's contempt of God's miraculous work to heal a man with a shriveled hand angered Jesus (Mk. 3:5). Further, Moses' anger with the hard heartedness of Pharaoh (Ex. 11:8), on numerous occasions with the people of Israel (Ex. 32:19), and with Korah and the Levities (Nu. 16:15; cf. Lev. 10:16) seemed quite acceptable. The apostle Paul when arriving in Athens and seeing their idols lining the streets was angered (Acts 17:16). Jesus told the parable of a King whose anger was stirred by both the insult and assault on his servants by those refusing his invitation to the wedding of his son (Mt. 22:7; cf. 18:34). Clearly, it would seem, that not all anger is a sin. There are occasions where "righteous indignation" is appropriate.

With this distinction in mind the apostle Paul wrote, "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26), and James instructed, "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (Jas. 1:19). Repeatedly we find that God is an angry and jealous God, but His anger is controlled for He is "slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6, 14). The

conclusion then is that though anger can be righteous and appropriate it carries far greater likelihood especially in mankind to become a tool of the sinful nature of man. Thus, we find a list of warnings: "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)." "Be ... slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." (Jas. 1:19-20). Elders are not to be quick-tempered (Titus 1:7). Fathers are not to provoke their children to anger (Eph. 6:4). It is pointed out that prayer and anger are incompatible with one another (1 Tim. 2:8).

What specifically is righteous anger? When can anger be right? Anger is righteous when it is anger about sin. Anger is wrong and fleshly when it is prompted by selfish interests. James describes unrighteous anger so simply as, man's anger (1:20). This phrase strikes an immediate contrast between the selfish interests of man and the interests of God. God becomes angry when His righteous laws are violated, when His glory is held in contempt, when His justice is mocked, when His invitation is spurned. This is why Moses' anger was not condemned; it is why Paul was angered in Athens. It is the foundation of Jesus' anger. They each became angry with those who offended the will of God. Such is the first characteristic of righteous anger.

But righteous anger is not simply becoming angry about the right issue; it is also becoming angry in the right way. When Jesus was angered by the Pharisees disregard for need of the man with the shriveled hand, He did the right thing; He healed the man; He didn't vaporize the Pharisees. When Moses was angered with Israel he cried out to Yahweh. When Paul was angered with Athen's idolatry he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. Righteous anger is not simply being angry about the right issues it is also being angry in the right way.

But 99%, conservatively, of the anger we deal with in our personal lives is not righteous anger. Rather, it is "man's anger;" it is "fleshly anger;" it is unrighteous anger; righteous it is the kind of anger which the Bible says is one of the reasons for the coming of the Wrath of God (Col. 3:6).