

## Anger and Forgiveness

Our anger can be sparked and fanned into a roaring inferno in what seems less than a nano-second. Often the identified culprit, the one most capable of sparking such explosive combustion, is someone intimately close to us: our spouse, our child, a close friend, an associate, or even a dear brother or sister in the Lord. Perhaps they have inflicted deep, intimate, personal pain; or perhaps they stand in our way, frustrating what we want, blocking our goals, or refuse to meet our expectations, even to meet our most basic needs; or perhaps they simply pose a threat of what we are afraid they might not do; or we are afraid of what they might do. From our perspective, they have grievously offended and hurt us personally and deeply. More than likely it's not the first time either. We are angry! ANGRY spelled in all capital letters! What do we do?

We have basically two choices. **First, we can give into our anger and allow it to run it's "natural," fleshly, unrighteous course.** We might turn it inward and become depressed. We might like Jonah indulge ourselves in a grand "pity party" for ourselves. Or lash ourselves in a tirade of self-condemnation. We might on the other hand, take careful aim, as one might with a flame-thrower, and engulf the guilty party, or at least a close bystander, with the blast-furnace of our anger, thoroughly venting our indignation. In these, and in a myriad of other, ways, we can very "naturally," guided by the "flesh," unrighteously release and give into our anger.

**The second way to respond to our anger is to follow God's advice to Cain: "it [your sinful anger] desires to have you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:7).** As Paul quoted the Psalmist David: "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26; cf. Ps. 4:4), so though angry, we must follow the wisdom of God and not our "fleshly" inclinations. Though angry, we must be on guard that our anger does not become unrighteous and sinful! Ultimately as we submit our anger to the Holy Spirit's control we must do the work of forgiving the offender (cf. Eph. 4:25-32; Col. 3:12-14; Mt. 6:12,14-15; 18:21-22). If we do not move into the task of forgiveness, then we have sinned in our anger. We may be fully justified in having been offended by the action of another. Theirs may have been a totally unjustified attack upon us, but if we do not work through it to the place that we are able to forgive both the offense and the offender, then in our anger we have sinned. Our anger has mastered us. It desired us, and it has devoured us. We have been possessed and enslaved by it.

Interestingly, social science research bears out the fact that some of the popularly recommended ways to manage personal anger do not relieve anger's stress, but in many ways increase it. The key issue to the relief of stress resulting from anger is to bring, resolution to the situation which prompted it. If we fully ventilate our anger, and there is no resolution; the stress of our anger is increased not relieved (in Carol Tavris, "Anger Defused," Psychology Today [November, 1982], p.35). Forgiveness brings personal resolution.

When we are offended by someone it creates a relational barrier between ourselves and the offender. We cannot freely approach them for this barrier of offense stands in our way. Forgiveness is the act of moving that barrier out of the way. Tim LaHaye rightly points out, "Forgiveness is not a feeling first. It is a choice that goes beyond feelings; it is an activity of the will." Jay Adams agrees, "forgiveness ... is a promise or commitment to three things:

1. I will not use it against [my offender].
2. I will not talk to others about [the offense].
3. I will not dwell on [the offense]."

(in Tim LaHaye, Anger Is A Choice, pp. 114, 116)

The decision to forgive is not only the best decision for our anger and for our relationships; it is the best decision for our relationship with the Lord. God does not forgive the unforgiving. Jesus said, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Mt. 6:14-15; cf. 7:1-2). It is not only good to forgive; it is necessary. In this regard, we are able to reframe our offense to see it in a new way. "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13). As you envision your repeated and grievous offenses committed against God, and you would desire His graciousness to you, so we are directed to be gracious to our offenders in the same way. Such is the point of Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:23-35). When we lose sight of the fact of how much God has forgiven us (millions upon millions) versus the few dollars owed to us which would be equal to the greatest of offenses committed against us by someone else, then we are assured that God does not forgive the unforgiving (v. 35; cf. Mt. 5:7). So we must see the necessity of forgiving not as something which is optional but as an essential fruit of having embraced God's grace. Our responsibility is to forgive. "There is only one unconscious motive for retaining anger (for holding grudges): that single motive is vengeance " (in Minirth and Meier, Happiness Is A Choice, p. 158). To plot a course of vengeance is to assume God's and His administration of justice (Rom. 12:19; 14:4). God alone is able of just judgment and complete and righteous vengeance (1 Cor. 4:5). We must leave God's business to God, attend to our business and not confuse the two (cf. Gen. 50:19, 20).

One who has forgiven a grievous offense knows that such work is never easy. There's so much pain to bear, so much pressure "to get even," so much frustration, so much anger, so many feelings screaming, "No, I won't forgive. He doesn't deserve it!" "Forgiveness is very costly. It costs you, not the person being forgiven. Forgiveness means that justice will not always be fulfilled. Forgiveness does not rebuild the house that has been burned down by someone carelessly playing with matches. Forgiveness does not always put a broken marriage back together. Forgiveness does not restore virginity to the rape victim.