

Un-Deadly Anger

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We are angry. And we have our reasons...

adults who should have been safe, but weren't

parents who should have stayed married, but didn't

kids at school who could have been kinder, but weren't

bosses who should have been fair, but weren't

a church which could have helped, and didn't

a roommate who should have told us what everyone was saying, but didn't

people who should have left our stuff alone, but didn't

institutions which could have flexed, but wouldn't

disease which could have landed elsewhere, but didn't

a person who should have stayed faithful, and didn't

death which should have waited, but wouldn't.

We are angry. And we have our reasons. And our reasons are the most reasonable reasons of all...to us. So we are angry. Some of us know it. Some of us don't.

Anger is the emotion that tells us

that we are not getting what we want or deserve,

that our will is being blocked or frustrated,

that we are losing someone... or something very important to us.

Anger is that flashing red light on our instrument panel that says,

“Pay attention! Something is wrong here.”

And the Bible has a very interesting two-word command about anger: BE ANGRY!

Paul is explaining to the Ephesians the new life they are being schooled in. He tells them they are no longer living by the old lessons of self-centeredness, but by the new way of Jesus-likeness. When God raised them from their dead old ways, he resurrected them into new learning. In essence he tells them,

Be angry, but don't sin.

Be angry, but don't stay angry.

Be angry, but don't room with the devil.

It appears that Paul assumes we will be angry. What matters is what we do with it and about it.

In Matthew 5, Jesus talks about anger in conjunction with the Old Testament law about murder.

“You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say ‘you fool’, you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Mt. 5:21-22, NRSV)

The consequences of anger seem to escalate in this text. We begin our anger with a warning about liability of being judged and end it with a threat of hell-fire.

Anger is first *an emotion* for which we may be liable.

Then it becomes *an insult*. The word is *raca*. To pronounce it correctly, you need to spit from the back of your throat. To say it is to do it. We began with emotional feelings about a deed done to us, and now we have an attitude about it. We've slept on it and woken with names for the person who did the deed to us. In the words of Dallas Willard, we hold them in contempt. Before we move to hurt them, we must pass judgment on them in our court of reasonable anger. (The Divine Conspiracy, Dallas Willard, Harper San Francisco, 1998, p.147-154)

Finally, anger is *a destructive deed*. It is a deed to say to one, “*Nabal*” or “You fool”. In Biblical days, this was a curse. A curse was the opposite of a blessing. A blessing was words invested with power to give life. A curse was words invested with power to

destroy. This curse assigned one to the trash heap of godlessness. The word is *nabal*. Say this to someone and you're headed to hell, or Gehenna, as the text records it.

I've been to hell. I went there several years ago with a group of college students. We were visiting Jerusalem when the guide pointed out the Valley of Hennom (Gehenna). It was the city dump, the place where people took their trash and heaved it over the cliff down into the valley. Earlier in Jewish history, the Ammonites had sacrificed their babies to the gods in the valley.

You may remember the description of hell – “where the worm does not die and the smoke goes up forever”. That's because worms were always eating the refuse and the public servants kept the fire going at the city dump to turn trash into ashes.

Gehenna – where everything worthless is taken and left.

Gehenna – where you put things that have no useful life left in them.

When you get to the point that the anger inside has moved from

an emotion to be aware of

to

an attitude of contempt

to

a destructive deed...

you are spent, used up, ready for the trash heap. There is nothing of worth or value left in the anger.

Most of us take our anger in one of two directions – inward or outward.

Outward anger looks like road rage, yelling and screaming, a fist through a wall or a foot through a door, giving hand signals telling someone where to go, destroying property.

Inward anger is very different. It looks like obsessive worrying, biting your fingernails, depression, cutting, eating yourself to death, letting other people use your body, walling yourself in, suicide.

One of the clearest pictures of inward anger was painted in the movie, *Dead Poet's Society*. Neil was a college student who wanted to major in the arts. His father was a domineering man who insisted that he forget the foolishness of drama and prepare to

run the family business. Neil is torn between pleasing his father and following his dream. Forbidden by his father, he wins the lead role in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His performance brings the house down. His father, rather than congratulate him, drags him from the cast celebration and drives him home where Neil is given one more tongue-lashing. Late in the night, Neil sneaks quietly into his father's office, takes a gun, and kills himself. That is anger turned inward.

Outward anger hurts others.

Inward anger hurts us.

Either way, life is destroyed.

The good news is that there is a third option. We can take our anger Godward.

Be angry – tell God.

Be angry - don't sin.

Be angry – vent heavenward.

God specializes in trash recycling. God takes the smoldering, worm-eaten trash of our life and converts it to something useful- peace, reconciliation, justice. The anger is not discarded by God, but redeemed for useful purposes. Being a Christian does not eliminate our anger. It converts and transforms it.

Could it be that anger, yielded to God, shaped and directed by God, becomes the passion for redeeming the world? Could it be that redeemed anger is the energy we need to do something about a world gone wrong?

I wish I could be as angry as Jesus. And I'm not talking about the one-time temper tantrum he threw in the temple.

I'm guessing it was anger that gazed into Pharisee's eyes on Sabbath and saw the forbidding look...and he healed anyway.

I'm guessing it was anger that stooped to the ground as people quoted scripture about stoning an adulterous woman.

I'm guessing it was anger that cast the devil out of a crazed man and into the town pork supply.

I'm guessing it was anger that stilled a storm.

I'm guessing it was anger that raised Lazarus.

I think the redeeming deeds of Jesus may have come from anger. He saw the world at its worst, destroying the people God loves, and he looked heavenward to the Father asking, "What do you want me to do with this?" And the result was a passion for wholeness, justice, peace. The Spirit moved him to act. He could not casually observe a world gone wild.

It makes me wonder if William Wilberforce one day in England just couldn't stomach any more slave trading, and if he looked heavenward and asked, "What do you want me to do with this?"

It makes me wonder if Susan B. Anthony just couldn't stomach any more alcohol abuse.

It makes me wonder if Martin Luther King, one day down in Birmingham, just couldn't stomach any more racial prejudice.

It makes me wonder if Charles Colson couldn't stomach the spiraling plight of prisoners.

It makes me wonder if Nelson Mandela couldn't stomach any more apartheid.

It makes me wonder if we figure out what's in our craw, what makes us angry, if we wouldn't be on the verge of discovering the passion for redemptive action. Maybe our calling is connected to our anger.

If there were more redeemed anger in the world, there would be less poverty, less discrimination, less character assassination, less abuse, less divorce, less pain. If there were more redeemed anger, there would be fewer battered wives, neglected children, religious frauds, power games, liars and cheats.

Christians are too nice. We swallow our anger too often. It's time we took it to God and figured out what to do with it. No need to waste things that can be recycled. Be angry – don't sin.

Forest Gump loved Jenny. From childhood, they were bound in friendship. Jenny's father abused her. She took her anger inward and almost destroyed her life – drugs, alcohol, running, hiding, letting anyone use her body. She came to the brink of suicide. But Forest loved her. One day, as a seeking adult, she returned home. She walked down the road to her old house, long since emptied by the death of her father. The anger that she had turned inward suddenly erupted outward. Jenny began to hurl rocks at the old house. She threw every rock she could find, with every ounce of energy she could muster, and then fell in a heap in the road. Forest sat down beside her, took her in his loving arms, and said those profound words – "Sometimes there's just not enough rocks." In that moment, Jenny's life began again.

God painfully watches our attempt to resolve our anger, either by throwing rocks at others, or by stoning ourselves. God stands ready in any moment to take us up in divine arms, recognize the pain done to us, receive the raw anger into himself, and redeem it for good. Only God can do this...and God's people on his behalf.

Anger need not be deadly. It may be quite lively!

Taken from Seven Deadly Sins: The Uncomfortable Truth, by Dan Boone, President, Trevecca Nazarene University

