

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Practical Instructions About Anger

by Dan Trygg

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

James 1:19-20

We have been studying what the Bible has to say about anger. We are designed in God's image, and one aspect of that is that we are emotional beings. **God experiences and expresses emotions, and gave us the capacity to do the same.** In some ways, emotions are like our five physical senses. **They help us discern information about the world around us, and often motivate us to action.** Emotions are not chosen, they are involuntary responses to what we perceive is happening around us. **Our emotions react to situations that *we think* are positive or negative. If our *perceptions* are incomplete or inaccurate, our emotional responses can be inappropriate or misguided.** We can misunderstand what is really happening around us, or mistakenly associate a present experience with something from our past that “feels” or “seems” to be similar, but really does not fit. In addition to the problem of our misperceiving what is really going on around us, **we also may have not learned *how* to respond to our emotional experiences in a healthy and productive manner.** God's emotions are always healthy, appropriate and in balance. Because He is all-knowing, He never misunderstands what is going on. Because He is secure and sound within Himself, and the epitome of wholeness, maturity and balance, He never acts inappropriately. Our emotions are not like that, however. Just as babies are born equipped with sensory abilities that often takes years to fully develop, so also **we need to calibrate our emotional faculties and learn how to use them in healthy and mature ways.** Just as we have to learn to control our bodily functions, we also need to learn restraint and control over our emotions. We must learn how to *more accurately perceive* and *evaluate* the experiences that trigger our emotions. We also need to *develop control*, and a *mature understanding of how to respond appropriately* both to pleasurable and uncomfortable emotional experiences.

Anger is one of the strongest, and potentially one of the most destructive, emotions we experience. The Bible has much to say about anger. It does not tell us that anger is bad, or evil. In fact, it *commands us* to be angry, but admonishes us to *not misuse the anger* we feel by expressing it in inappropriate ways. **The scriptures give practical guidelines to help us avoid the pitfalls of anger, and guidance about handling it appropriately. Here are some:**

(1.) Don't hang out with angry people. “Do not associate with someone given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered person, ²⁵ lest you learn his ways, and find a snare for yourself.” (Prov. 22:24-25). Some observations, here: First of all, it is quite clear that the Bible says that **an angry mindset and behaviors are learned.** That means *they can also be changed* by a renewing of the mind. Secondly, it is clearly stated that **an angry mindset can lead to trouble.** The word for “snare” means “bait, lure or trap”. An angry mindset can become a liability that can lead to temptation, foolish behavior, and choices that are easy-to-get-into-but-hard-to-get-out-of. If we develop a propensity toward anger, the enemy can easily set up situations that lure us into an angry response. The word “bait, snare, or trap” implies that **we often do not see the danger until it is too late.** Also, snares were often *deadly*. An animal would get caught in it and struggle until it finally died. ***Sometimes the destruction caused by anger is irreparable.*** The word translated as “yourself” can also mean “your soul”. The “trap” of learning an angry mindset and habitual behaviors can affect not only our own inner emotional well-being, but can also become a serious *spiritual problem* for us. Thirdly, **angry people tend to stir up more anger.** “An angry person stirs up strife, and someone who is hot-tempered abounds in transgression” (Prov. 29:22). Note that the anger here results in some kind of abusive behavior (“transgression”). The word translated as “stirs up” implies that the angry person rises up or opposes the other person. ***Angry people often pick quarrels*** or fights (Prov. 10:12; 15:18). Fourthly, **do not be codependent with an angry person.** If you protect them from the consequences of their behavior, they are likely to reoffend (Prov. 19:19). Angry people are not easily changed, unless they recognize their problem and *want* to change. That does not happen until they see that the problem is *their* issue, not everyone else's fault. Reaping the consequences of their actions is important to help them see reality. Bailing angry people out, covering for their actions, not only will cost you dearly, but will only extend their denial.

(2.) Avoid unnecessary conflict. “But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Tit. 3:9). “But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness... (II Tim. 2:16). When you think of it, so **many arguments are about foolish, unimportant things.** People get angry and argue over the craziest stuff! So much anger and arguing could be

avoided if we just kept quiet about trivial and foolish things. “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people” (Rom. 12:18).

(3.) Find out the facts. Be “quick to hear” (Jas. 1:19). It is important that we not judge what *we suppose* other people are thinking or intending. Do not *assume* you know. **Let them speak for themselves. Ask questions with an open mind to understand.** Do not ask loaded or leading questions. Listen to understand *their* point of view, ...which means how *they* perceive things. It is important that you let them answer *completely*. Do not interrupt them, or talk over them, when they are talking. You do not have to *agree with* how they understand things. You are not trying to assign blame, here. The goal is not to “be right”. What *is* important is to discover where points of misunderstanding, miscommunication, or difference may be. When we discover those, then we can attempt to clarify and come to some agreement. Often, when we find out that the other person did not see the situation at all like we did, we can understand why they did or said what they did. Seeking to understand the other person will go a long ways to defuse conflict.

(4.) Be careful how you respond. Be “slow to speak” (Jas. 1:19). Do not fly off the handle and shoot off your mouth at others, even if you are agitated. You *can* control how you express yourself. **Take a time-out to dial down the emotions. Calm down. Think through what you are going to say, and choose your words carefully. Keep your voice even and soft.** “A soft, gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1). Do not be harsh, accusatory, or sarcastic, and do not raise your voice. (Profanity and name calling would be “harsh”.) Use “I” and “me” statements to talk about how *you* understood things, or how things looked *to you*. Don’t come out and judge the other person’s character. Give them a chance to explain *themselves*. The goal is not polarization or isolation, it is to *establish common ground*, and *bring about reconciliation* and restoration of relationship. Remember that we are trying to become a team. We are attempting to build one another up. Remember to “speak truth *in love*” (Eph. 4:15).

(5.) Deal with what you can, ...and let go of the rest. Ephesians 4:26 tells us to “not let the sun go down on the thing that offended you”. **It is important that we do what we can to work things out with others as quickly as possible.** Remember, unresolved issues give the enemy, the devil (slanderer), room to try to build a case against our brother or sister, and make things worse (Eph. 4:27). “If possible, so far as it depends *on you*, be at peace with all people” (Rom. 12:18). This indicates that **there will be times of unresolved conflict**, but we are to do what we can to live in peace. Address the problem, and then put it aside. **Do not retaliate.** “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all” (Rom. 12:17). **Do not seek revenge.** “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” (Rom. 12:19). God is the avenger and judge, ...not you! He is the Father who will discipline His children (Heb. 12:5-11). **The Lord is more than happy to comfort us when we are hurting, but He does not like when we “tattle” on one another**, or whine or complain against one another. He wants His children to get along, and work things out. If we are attempting to manipulate Him to take action against our brother or sister, *out of our own bitterness*, we will bring His discipline upon our own heads! **Do not go on nursing unresolved issues, replaying them over and over again in your mind, or speaking of them with others.** “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down” (Prov. 26:20). Unresolved anger can quickly grow into bitterness and judgment, which can poison the minds and hearts of many (Heb. 12:15). **It is especially important to not involve others in this problem, unless it is for the purpose of restoration and resolution.** Again, the goal is finding common ground, establishing understanding and reconciliation. It is not about trying to find others to “side with” you. The scriptures give clear direction as to what to do when there is someone caught in sin (Gal. 6:1-5; I Cor. 5:1-5), or when there is hurt or an offense between brothers and sisters in Christ (Matt. 5:23-26; 18:15-35). The goal is *always* restoration. **Be liberal with grace and forgiveness toward others, for God will treat you as you treat others** (Matt. 6:14,15; 7:1-5).

We will not always get the resolution we would like. Everyone in the Body is in a process of growth, and at different stages of Christlikeness. Some are safe and approachable. Some are not. We are responsible to do *our* part, and leave the results to God. We cannot “strong arm” agreement, acceptance or even peaceful co-existence. We can work toward it. We can lobby for it. Sometimes, however, we run up against a wall of blindness or stubbornness that cannot be breached *at this time*. After we have done all we can do, we must commit that other person into the hands of God to deal with. **Sometimes, the unresolved problem goes so far as to make that person unsafe to be around.** Matthew 18:17, “...let him be to you (singular) as a Gentile and a tax-collector”, implies that **you must put some distance between you and that person, for now**. Hopefully, that will change, as they mature.

There is skill to be developed regarding dealing with anger in our relationships. *What* am I perceiving that causes this emotion to rise up? Am I discerning *accurately*? Is my anger justified? How can I address the problem *effectively*? *When* and *how* do I pursue communication and confrontation, and *when* and *how* do I let go? *How can I defuse anger* in my relationships with others, and *within my own heart*? These are the areas we must address in order to effectively understand, utilize and address anger in our lives.