

“Be Angry, But...”

What ticks you off? What presses your “hot buttons”? Here’s one of mine. A driver pulls out in front of you, pokes along, then as you approach a traffic light he or she speeds up, just makes it through as the light turns red, leaving you to sit at the intersection? Burns me up! You could no doubt name things in particular that really irritate and anger you.

There is a ton of anger these days. People are angry with the governor, the President, with those who want to reopen PA sooner, and with those who insist it’s too soon to relax the restrictions.

Do you have a temper? Or, on the other hand, are you one of those people who hardly ever shows anger? What place should anger have in our life? If we’re a follower of Jesus, is it OK to get angry?

How about Jesus? Did Jesus ever get angry? Oh yes! One Sabbath Jesus goes into the synagogue. There is a man there with a deformed hand. Religious leaders present keep an eye on Jesus, to see if He will heal the man. That would be “work” according to their Sabbath rules. Jesus asks: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). His accusers remain silent. Then it says, “He looked around at them with *anger*, grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5). Jesus was ticked off at these religious leaders who put rules ahead of people’s needs!

Remember, too, Jesus once took a whip, went into the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers who were cheating people. You think He wasn’t angry? And once, when people were bringing children to Jesus, and the disciples told the parents to go away and not bother the Lord, it says Jesus was *indignant* at His disciples (Mark 10:14). Jesus, at times, got angry! This is a side of Jesus we often ignore.

Anger is a God-given emotion. It’s not a bad thing, per se. It can serve a useful purpose, or it can be destructive.

What do you do with your anger? **Some of us are the kind of people who keep our anger inside of us.** We sit on it. We bottle it up. Maybe we’re *not even aware* of the anger inside us. We’re the “nice guy” or the “sweet lady”. Somebody does something that really ought to make a person upset and angry, but our response is, “Oh, that’s OK.” “No, I’m not mad.” I remember some time ago counseling a parishioner whose husband was running around on her. Word was getting out in the community and he was making a fool of her. At one point in the session she said to me, “No, I’m not mad at him.” My response was: “*You’re not!*”

But here’s the thing: often people like this, sweet and forgiving on the outside, on the inside are stewing and churning! That was me, for years. Somebody would do something to hurt or offend me and I would smile and say, “Oh, that’s OK. No big deal.” But inside my feelings would be churning and festering. I would think of what I really wished I had said to that person! For years, I’ve been working at learning to *express* my anger. Some of us have never learned that it’s ok at times to be angry. In fact, that it’s *appropriate* at times to feel bitter and resentful!

If this is what we're like, most likely this goes back to our family of origin and our growing up years. Some of us were never taught a healthy, safe ways to express our anger. It was never modeled by our parents. Who was allowed to be angry in your family growing up? What happened when you got angry (especially at your parents)? Were you allowed to have those feelings, or were you scolded if you did?

Some of us bottle up our anger; we don't know how to express it in appropriate ways. *I think Christians especially are vulnerable to this.* One study indicated that people with extensive religious training tend to deny and hide their anger rather than express it. In some congregations there's an unwritten expectation: No one is allowed to be angry here – *especially the pastor!* So, we may have the idea that "good Christians never get angry" or that Jesus followers are always "nice". But Jesus was not always nice!

I really want to get across the message that anger is a common human feeling, a God-given emotion. In fact, some destructive things can happen when we suppress and sit on our anger. Sometimes people who can't *experience and express* their anger turn it inward on themselves in the form of *depression*. Or self-contained anger can make us *physically ill* – e.g. high blood pressure or digestive problems. There was a person in a congregation I served who was acting especially quiet and withdrawn. He told me he was angry with some of the people in the church. He also said he was doctoring for high pressure. He told me when he comes to church, his blood pressure skyrockets.

So, some of us have difficulty owning our anger, and expressing our anger. Not Jesus! But you know what? Some of us are at the other extreme. *We have anger that we can't control.* We have a temper, a short fuse. I'm thinking of a Christian man in one church. He loved the Lord. He could be the nicest guy. But, oh, what a short fuse. If something didn't set right with him, he'd come at you. His face would get red. I called him the "resident hot head" in that church.

Jesus got angry, but His anger was never out of control. There are Bible verses that warn against out of control, destructive anger. "Short-tempered people do foolish things" (Proverbs 14:17 NLT). Proverbs 29:22 tells us, "An angry person starts fights; a hot-tempered person commits all kinds of sins." (NLT)

There's another kind of anger that's out of control. Not the sudden flare-up type, but the *slow boiling type*. People who are just always angry at something. Or angry over something that happened months or years ago, and just can't let go of it. This too is out of control anger.

There are a couple of verses in Ephesians 4 that talk about anger. "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Notice, it says, "Be angry." This is ok. It's a part of life. But...*do not sin!* "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Don't nurse it. Don't hang on to it. "Don't make room for the devil." When we're in a state of rage, we're more at risk. We open ourselves up to saying and doing evil things.

Learning to deal with our anger in healthy ways is important. It's crucial for our own emotional and mental health, for maintaining healthy relationships with people and with God, and also so it won't spoil our witness for Christ (if we're a follower of Jesus).

Let me close with some suggestions on what to do with this God-given feeling of anger. First of all, ***recognize and acknowledge when we feel angry.*** Don't deny it; don't act as if it isn't there. Anger is an appropriate response when certain things happen. It's what we do with our anger that's important.

Next, try to understand what's underneath our anger. In the Scripture we looked at, where Jesus was angry with the religious leaders in the synagogue, what made Jesus angry? Mark 3:5 tells us: "He was grieved at their hardness of heart." Notice, underneath Jesus' anger was sadness, grief, that the religious leaders cared more about keeping their man-made Sabbath rules than they did about showing compassion for a disabled man.

Here's something really important to remember: anger is a *secondary emotion*. Underneath anger are more primary feelings, like fear, or hurt. So, the next time you feel anger, try to step back and ask yourself what's underneath the anger: is it that you feel hurt, unappreciated? Are you afraid? If we can go deeper and address those primary feelings, we stand a much better chance of resolving whatever issue we are facing.

So first, acknowledge our anger, own it...then try to understand what the anger is about. The next step is: ***Practice expressing anger in appropriate ways.*** If we have a short fuse, count to 10 before we fly off the handle. Better yet, count to 300! Don't take our anger out on the wrong person! Don't blow our stack at the server if the food is cold. If we've had a bad day at work and are angry at the boss or a coworker don't come home and lash out at a family member or the family pet!

Express what you feel to the person you're mad at: "I'm angry with you that..." or "What you did really hurt me..." (annoyed me, scared me), or "When you do this, I get really angry because I'm afraid that...". I know, that's hard for some of us to do! But we can *learn*. I once did therapy with a family. Four grown children (3 sisters and a brother) were all in the office. There was a lot of anger in that room. They said how they weren't allowed to be angry growing up – only their mom was permitted to be angry. In the therapy session, I worked at trying to coach them to verbalize their long-standing anger towards their mother, and each other. We can *learn* to express anger in appropriate and safe ways. It is a skill that we can acquire.

Finally, take the step of ***relinquishing our anger to God and moving on.*** The Bible says we have to move beyond "angry mode". If we stay there, it will destroy us! Of course, this can be difficult! If the wound that causes the anger is deep, it can take a long time to process our anger (e.g. if we have experienced physical or sexual abuse, or if a spouse has cheated on us). Most of us at times *need God's help*, either to control our anger, or learn to get in touch with it and express it. But God is there to help us!

Jesus got angry at times. Aren't you glad Jesus was like us in that regard! Remember, Jesus understands and can help us.

