

LESSON 1

Overcoming Anger

The couple shouted at each other, their faces red with anger as they gestured wildly. Their baby daughter was crying, so her older brother held her tightly as they hid behind the sofa in the living room. Next door, the neighbors could hear the screaming and crying, but they did not want to get involved. Finally, the father stormed out of the house and down the street into the twilight. The mother ran to her bedroom, punched a pillow furiously, and then collapsed in tears onto the bed. Slowly the children peeked out from behind the sofa, making sure the battle was over. This was almost a weekly occurrence.

Anger is a very strong emotional reaction or response to a variety of situations. Anger is consuming lives. One may ask, is anger a sin? Is it possible to control anger? This lesson will offer biblical perspectives on understanding anger.

LESSON OUTLINE

The Sides of Anger
Dealing with Anger
The Rule of Love
God's Righteous Anger

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain the positive and negative aspects of anger.*
2. *Point out guidelines for dealing with anger.*
3. *Discuss how the rule of love works, even when we are angry.*
4. *Describe aspects of God's righteous anger.*

The Sides of Anger

Objective 1:

Explain the negative and positive aspects of anger.

Anger affects us inwardly and outwardly. There are three components of anger: the emotional (how you feel inside), the cognitive (what you are thinking), and the behavioral (what you do). Certain expressions of anger in thought, word, or deed may indeed be sinful, but the angry feelings themselves may not be. There is even a biological component of anger. We see this in babies. When they do not get their way, they become angry. Babies do not have to learn how to get angry because anger is a natural response to stress and frustration. In adults, the emotion of anger may be part of a God-designed, internal mechanism to help give people the energy and motivation to accomplish difficult or dangerous tasks.

Anger is also a learned response that depends on many factors. For instance, we may mimic the way other people, including our parents, handled their anger. Proverbs 22:24–25 warns, “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.” Even though not all anger is sin, the Scriptures encourage us in general to refrain from anger. Psalm 37:8 says, “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.” Solomon writes, “Anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9). The writer of Proverbs says, “Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming” (Proverbs 27:4).

The Negative Side of Anger

The expression of anger includes feelings of irritation, hatred, hostility, self-pity, outbursts of temper, frustration, low self-esteem, pessimism, or even verbal and physical aggression. People do not often know how to handle their anger. Get a few hostile people together, and they can create more anger. We see this often in news reports of protests and demonstrations that spiral out of control and result in death and injury.

For some in gangs or terrorist groups, anger and hostility bring a warped sense of honor. But there is no true, godly honor in this. The writer of Hebrews says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men ... that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (12:14–15). Jesus also encouraged us to give up our anger and forgive. Unresolved anger and unforgiveness are not just responses to perceived wrongs but an attitude of pride that will hurt our relationship with God.

Genesis 4:1–16 gives a powerful story about anger. Adam and Eve, the first two human beings, had two sons—one named Cain and the other, Abel. One day the sons made an offering to God. Abel’s sacrifice was pleasing to God, but Cain’s sacrifice fell short and was not pleasing to God. The Bible does not tell us exactly what was wrong with Cain’s sacrifice, but we do know that Cain became angry over the whole affair. In Genesis

4:6–7, God confronts Cain about his anger: “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” Immediately after this, Cain takes his brother into a field and murders him. The first recorded murder in history happened because of anger.

The Positive Side of Anger

While anger obviously has a negative side, it also has a positive side. Anger can serve as a warning that something is wrong emotionally. Anger may even be a symptom of frustration, fear of failure, unresolved guilt feelings, and physical exhaustion.

To illustrate a positive element of anger, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:29, “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” Paul got angry when people were led into sin, especially by false teachers and hypocrites. This kind of anger is often described as a “righteous anger.” Righteous anger is never out of control; it never leads us into sin. In those rare cases when it happens, it causes us to draw close to God because of the immorality we see around us. Anger can thus motivate people to stand against evil and suffering.

Even Jesus expressed anger. In Mark 3:5, “He [Jesus] looked around at them [certain Jews] in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.” These Jews were bothered that Jesus had healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. Mark 11:15–17 records another case where Jesus became angry.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it

not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

So if anger is a normal human response, why do so many passages of Scripture tell us that it is wrong? For example, Paul writes in Colossians 3:8, "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Paul also advises, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger" (Ephesians 4:31). In the context of the whole Bible, anger is generally viewed as negative because of its potential to cause people to sin.

Following are scenarios that can create anger problems:

1. A person's work environment or demands can make him or her angry.
2. Driving in rush hour traffic may provoke anger or road rage.
3. Poor physical health can foster anger.
4. The use of alcohol can add to anger.
5. Poor self-esteem can cause anger.
6. The desire for power or control in a relationship can create a bridge to anger.
7. The desire for perfection can lead to anger.
8. Frustration, tension, and nervousness can create situations for volatile anger.
9. Depression can increase anger.

Dealing with Anger

Objective 2:

Point out guidelines for dealing with anger.

It is possible to control our anger. We do not have to let anger destroy our lives and our relationship with God. The Bible is full of practical advice about how to deal with anger. In Ephesians 4:26–27, Paul advises Christians, "'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.”

Our anger should never lead us to sin

Anger that moves us toward sin is not righteous anger. Sometimes in anger, people say or do cruel things. Many times I, Kevin, have gotten angry and done things that the Holy Spirit later convicted me about, and I had to apologize to the people I offended. God made me do that so many times that I finally learned it is easier to be silent when I am angry.

When you feel yourself becoming angry, get away for a while and calm down. Think about other things if possible. But above all, never react out of anger, for it will lead you to sin very quickly.

Do not let the sun go down on anger

Paul also writes, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). Be quick to forgive and get over things. If you allow anger to hide in your heart, it will always grow into bitterness. Some of the most difficult problems in ministry come when people are still angry about things that happened years before. It is much healthier emotionally and spiritually to be a person who forgives quickly.

Do not give the devil a foothold

Paul tells us not to give the devil a single foothold in our lives while we are angry. Anger can be a powerful tool that the devil uses against us. We must watch constantly that our lives are free from the control of the devil, and that we are staying close to the Master’s plan. If we avoid sinning, forgive quickly, and refuse to give the devil even a small space in our lives, then we will be able to deal with anger effectively.

Other Practical Ways to Deal with Anger

The longer you are a Christian, the less you will probably enter into foolish and unnecessary conflicts because you are becoming more Christlike in your

attitudes and behavior. Still, no one is exempt from conflict. One may not seek out trouble, yet conflicts come. The good news, though, is that not all conflict is bad. In fact, some conflict actually can be the door to resolving very important issues.

However, it is necessary to know how to deal with anger, especially when facing conflict with other people. Suppressing or burying anger is detrimental because the anger builds up and becomes uncontrollable. Learning to express anger correctly can have great benefits. In fact, anger becomes a positive means for change and growth in a relationship when the anger is controlled by love and an awareness of the other person's rights and worth. Following are six ways to deal with anger.

Talk about your feelings

It is better to talk about your feelings, not the other person's faults. People tend to become violent or angry when they are attacked. Stay away from negative expressions.

Stick to one conflict at a time

The resolution of one problem is difficult enough without pulling in old grievances. When we deal with problems as they arise, we do not carry around unprocessed anger.

Let the other person respond

People who walk out during an argument are dirty fighters! If you are angry with a spouse or friend, you have a right to express it. Conversely, you need to listen to the other side. This brings the possibility for resolution or compromise.

Aim for ventilation, not conquest

The point of showing our loved ones our anger is to vent our feelings, not to make them surrender. Many times it clears the air if the two people involved vent their emotions, getting their anger out, and then go back to loving each other.

Balance criticism with lots of affection

It is easier to get away with some expressions of anger if you balance them with lots of expressions of love. Love still is the greatest virtue.

Confess your anger before God

No matter what causes pent up anger in your life, confess the anger to the Lord. You might say, "I could never let God know how angry I am. He probably would not like it!" God already knows you are angry, but He still wants you to talk to Him about it. The psalmist expresses tough words towards his enemies: "Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O Lord, the fangs of the lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun" (Psalm 58:6–8). Although those are harsh words, they show an honest and hurting heart expressed to God. Instead of getting even or taking revenge on his enemies, the psalmist vents his anger to God. Like the psalmist, we can and should come to God with all our feelings. God can take a heart filled with anger and bitterness and change it. By His power we can even learn to love our enemies.

The Rule of Love

Objective 3:

Discuss how the rule of love works, even when we are angry.

In John 13:34–35, Jesus says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In John 15:12, Jesus repeats the command, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." Even when we are angry, we must continue to love others. This is the most effective way to communicate that we are disciples of Jesus.

Our love must be stronger than our strongest anger. We should love people, especially our brothers and

sisters in Christ, even when we are most angry. But one of the characteristics of God's love within us is that it is slow to anger. So if we truly love people, we will be patient with them.

Colossians 3:14 says, "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Love creates unity. Anger creates division. As the children of God, we are called to live in unity and peace. So there is no room for anger that will cause us to divide from one another. We must love, work together, forgive, and make allowances for the faults of others.

No one is perfect, not even you. If you have flaws and want people to overlook them and forgive you, then you should be willing to overlook the flaws in other people. First John 3:14–16 has strong words for Christians who fail to love other children of God.

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Hatred is sin, just as murder is sin. You cannot hate another person and love God. It is impossible to give up your life for someone you hate. Therefore, we must let go of all anger to create true love among God's people.

This law of love is the main guideline for Christians. Romans 13:8 says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law." This is the new law that Christians must follow.

If we truly love each other as God intended, then anger would not be a problem. First Peter 4:8 reminds us, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Love leads to forgiveness. If we love each other correctly, then we will have no

problem forgiving each other quickly. And God considers forgiveness to be very important.

James 1:19 tells us, “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” If we are quick to listen and slow to speak, there will be less reason to become angry. Often, anger comes from failure to listen to the other person. We should always try to see the other person’s perspective, and to listen more than speak.

God’s Righteous Anger

Objective 4:

Describe aspects of God’s righteous anger.

Some people want to think only of God’s attribute of love, but the Bible also reveals God’s righteous anger. Let us look at some characteristics of God’s anger.

God is slow to anger

First, the Bible tells us that God does not get angry quickly. When God expresses anger, it is justified and measured; He is never out of control. Also, God’s anger is coupled with love and mercy. Psalm 86:15 says, “But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” Psalm 103:8–9 also tells of the quality of God’s anger: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.” Psalm 145:8 adds, “The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.”

Learning to be slow to anger moves us in the direction of spiritual growth and maturity. It gives us the time and freedom to decide how to solve our problems or how to express anger. Following are biblical passages that encourage us to be slow to anger:

- “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

- “Do not be quickly provoked . . . , for anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9).
- “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19–20).
- “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).
- “A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel” (Proverbs 15:18).

God gets angry at sin and rebellion

In Exodus 32:9, we read the following: “‘I have seen these people,’ the Lord said to Moses, ‘and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.’” God’s anger is a reaction to human ungodliness.

Romans 1:18 tells us, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Simply put, God gets angry at sin. We should be very grateful that Jesus suffered the wrath of God against sin on the Cross. He took the punishment we deserved.

God’s anger is restrained and restorative

Psalms 78:38 says, “Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.” Isaiah writes, “In that day you will say: ‘I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me’” (Isaiah 12:1). Even when God expresses His anger, it is measured or limited. The Lord desires to restore and comfort those with whom He is angry. Sin angers God, but when the sinner repents the Lord immediately forgives and comforts the offender. God’s anger is only designed to bring repentance.

Conclusion

Here are practical thoughts to help you overcome anger.

- Acknowledge anger. Be willing to admit that you are angry.
- Control your thoughts. One's thought life is the key ingredient in dealing with one's emotions. Remember Paul's words in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."
- Discern the causes of the anger. Find out what makes you angry.
- Challenge your irrational beliefs. All of us have belief systems or mindsets that assist us in making judgments and evaluating ideas, people, and situations.
- Do not let everything bother you. Learn to laugh at normal failures and those things that irritate you. It will help remove the anger.
- Consider the goals for relationships. No one in a relationship is totally innocent or totally guilty.
- Develop peace of mind. You do great damage to yourself and potentially to others by living in anger. Let God do what you cannot do.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES FOR MEMORIZATION

Psalm 37:8

Psalm 78:38

Proverbs 15:1

Proverbs 16:32

Proverbs 27:5–6

Galatians 5:22–23

Ephesians 4:26

Hebrews 12:14–15

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

- According to the Scripture, how should we deal with anger?*
 - Let it fester for one month.*
 - Never deal with it.*
 - As soon as possible*
- According to psychologists, how we express anger may depend on*
 - if it is cloudy or sunny outside.*
 - what the stock market is doing.*
 - how our parents handled their anger*
- What happens if people do not deal with their anger?*
 - Anger finally goes away.*
 - Anger can turn into hostility, bitterness, and violence.*
 - Anger is transformed into love and peace.*
- According to the lesson, the three components of anger are*
 - emotional, cognitive, and behavioral.*
 - bad feelings, good feelings, and no feelings.*
 - ignoring feelings, accepting feelings, and acting out feelings.*
- What happens to the individual who buries his or her anger inside?*
 - He or she wins friends and influences people.*
 - The anger builds up until it becomes uncontrollable.*
 - He or she may be awarded as "employee of the month."*
- In times of relational conflict, one of the best ways to deal with anger is to*
 - attack the other person.*
 - bring up old grievances.*
 - balance criticism with lots of affection.*

7. *According to the psalmist, what will God do for us when we bring our anger to Him?*
 - a) *Make all the problems go away.*
 - b) *Change our hearts and help us respond in a way that pleases Him.*
 - c) *Pour His anger on us.*

8. *Which of these is not one of the tips Paul gives in Ephesians for dealing with anger?*
 - a) *Do not give the devil a place in your life.*
 - b) *Do not speak when you are angry.*
 - c) *Do not stay angry.*

9. *What does it mean to say that God is slow to anger?*
 - a) *God has emotions, but they are never out of control.*
 - b) *God explodes with anger from time to time.*
 - c) *God is a little slow in understanding what is going on.*

10. *A true statement about love is that love*
 - a) *divides, but anger unites.*
 - b) *is never as strong as anger.*
 - c) *is the most effective way to show we are Jesus' disciples.*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parenthesis.

1. *c* (1.1)
2. *c* (1.1)
3. *b* (1.1)
4. *a* (1.1)
5. *b* (1.2)
6. *c* (1.2)
7. *b* (1.2)
8. *b* (1.2)
9. *a* (1.4)
10. *c* (1.3)

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