

Anger • James 1:19–20

There seems to be a lot of anger in our society all the time. Every day the news tells about another shooting in the passion of anger because of a domestic disagreement, because of the color of a person's skin, because of the way a person drives. Every day there are hundreds of angry divorces between couples who once vowed to love and to cherish each other for the rest of their lives. Every day our courts are swamped with another wave of lawsuits as angry plaintiffs try to get even through a judge and a jury.

Even Christians and churches are caught up in the epidemic of anger. Talk to an usher who asked a latecomer to wait to be seated. Check out how many people leave church after church in anger over one disagreement or another. The chances are that some of us are angry right now over something that happened this past week or even this very morning.

There's not much doubt that anger is everywhere. But the question is: What should a Christian do about it? Are we to be angry people just like those who do not follow Jesus Christ?

James 1:19 and 20 gives God's advice: "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."

One problem with anger is that it is difficult to define. Anger can be a good thing or a bad thing. It is okay to be angry about some things but not about other things.

God gets angry — and God doesn't sin. Jesus became angry over a number of things. The Bible tells us all about it. Yet anger is described in James 1:20 as contrary to the righteous life that God desires. So how do we define anger in words that equally apply to God and us, to good anger and bad anger?

There are seven different Hebrew words for "anger" in the Old Testament and two more

Greek words for "anger" in the New Testament. It's like the variety of Eskimo words for snow!

In English we have only a few words for anger and one of them is often used incorrectly. We say that a person is really "mad". But "mad" is supposed to refer to insanity, not anger. "Wrath" is another possibility, but not a very common one any more.

"Anger" seems to be the best term available to us. In its simplest definition, anger is "passionate displeasure". "Displeasure" means that there is something we do not like. "Passionate" means that we have very strong feelings about whatever we do not like.

God becomes angry. Both the Old and the New Testaments have many examples of the

anger of God. He became angry over the sins in Sodom and Gomorrah and destroyed both cities. God became angry with the people of Israel when they wouldn't obey his commandments. Jesus became angry with those who

turned Jerusalem's Temple into a place of rip-off banking instead of worship.

God is always right when he is angry. That's because God is loving, just and patient. He is never angry without a very good reason. He is very slow to let his anger turn to action. He frequently gives second or third chances, demonstrates mercy and forgives.

I suppose you could paraphrase the Kentucky Fried Chicken ad that says, "We do chicken right" by saying, "God does anger right." In other words, whenever God becomes passionately displeased he always has a legitimate reason.

If God didn't become angry there would be something wrong with him and he wouldn't be God. Imagine God tolerating sin, accepting abuse and allowing injustice to continue unpunished. That would be very un-Godlike. Because God hates evil he must become angry against

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evil or he would flunk out as God.

We can become angry just like God. That is good. Whenever we are like God it is a good thing. Some people call God-like anger “righteous indignation” which means passionate displeasure against everything that causes God to have passionate displeasure. That’s good anger to have!

Unfortunately, most of our anger is wrong anger. It’s not based upon God’s passionate displeasure with sin. Usually it’s based on our passionate pleasure with sin.

Think about the times, places and people involved when we become angry. We become angry when our pride is hurt. We all like to look good. We like to impress other people. When someone says or does something that makes us look bad or unimpressive we often become angry with that person. So, if the boss points out our mistakes or gives someone else the promotion, we may become angry, not because the boss was wrong, but because our pride was hurt.

We become angry when we lose control. Many of us want to control everyone and everything else around us. That includes the highway where we drive, the people in our neighborhood and especially other members of our families. We want them to do everything “our way” and we feel and express passionate displeasure when we lose control.

Some of us are just angry people. We’re angry about everything and may not even know why. We’re angry because of the weather; we’re angry about what day it is; we’re angry that we’re so angry.

Only in the past few years have I discovered something about human behavior that I wish I had figured out a lifetime ago. It is that people who are angry with me are usually angry with everyone else. Personally, I don’t like others to be angry with me. I like for everyone to be happy and it makes me feel lousy when others are upset. Then I realized that the driver who yelled and honked and made an obscene gesture is just like that at home and work and everywhere else. His anger has nothing to do with me.

The person who is angry over the winters in

Minnesota, the majority party in Congress, the President in the White House, the news on television and the songs that are sung in church is often just an angry person.

Yes, our anger is often wrong. And it is that wrong anger that the Bible so often tells us to control. Jesus went so far in Matthew 5:22 as to say that the person who becomes angry with a brother is in danger of God’s judgment. He gets specific, saying that a person who angrily calls another person a “fool” risks going to hell!

Interestingly, anger usually does as much or more damage to the angry person than to anyone else. An article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune headlined that anger raised heart attack risk for those with heart disease and reported that people with heart disease more than double their risk of a heart attack when they get angry. The danger can last for two hours after the episode of anger. Other studies have shown that anger increases the heart rate, boosts high blood pressure and encourages the clogging of the arteries. The study was based on 1122 men and 500 women who had survived heart attacks and it found that their risks were about the same — 2-3 times higher during the two hours after they got angry.

While we sometimes hear in our society that it’s good to be angry and to let anger out, there have to be better alternatives, and it is the better alternatives that God specifically offers to us. It’s interesting, though, that the reason God suggests that anger is not good has nothing to do with our health. It has to do with what God wants to accomplish with the world in which we live. God wants things to be right. God does not want things to be bad or wrong. And so James 1:20 specifically tells us that our anger is wrong because it doesn’t bring about the righteous life that God desires.

God knows that there are problems in the world. God becomes angry about sin and injustice. But, he is slow to express his anger. He gives people lots of time and chances to turn around and do right.

God does not want us to play God. God doesn’t want us to be angry before he is or to be angrier than he is or to try to take his job into

our hands. What God wants us to do is live righteously rather than angrily. In other words, be really slow to become angry and trust God to handle the situation. Just behave Christianly and righteously even when other people don't.

The movie "Rudy" is about a young man who wanted to play football for Notre Dame but didn't have the athletic or academic qualifications. He just showed up in South Bend one day. Instead of getting into a class or onto the team he ended up with a campus priest who heard his story and had a great response. He said, "I've been a priest for 32 years and have come to two certainties: 1.) There is a God; 2.) I'm not him."

So how do we control anger when we feel it coming? James 1:19 and 20 offer three suggestions. The first is silence. James 1:19 says, "Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak . . ." "In other words, keep quiet. The truth is that our tongues get us into trouble when we become angry. We say things in the heat of emotion that are like throwing gasoline on a fire.

Some very practical advice is to "count to ten" before saying anything when you are becoming angry. For some of us the number is much higher!

Frankly, this is a decision to make in advance. Decide now that the next time you are in a situation that would otherwise lead you to talk too soon you will just keep quiet. Proverbs 17:28 says it more bluntly: "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."

The second suggestion in James 1:19 is that we should be "slow to become angry . . ." That's just like God. Exodus 34:6 says that God is "slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." That may not mean much to some people but it means a lot to Christians. As Christians we want to be like God. When we hear God say he is really slow to get angry, we want to be just like him!

If slowing down is particularly hard for you,

make it a topic for prayer. Ask for God's help. Practice when situations and people come along that would ordinarily make you angry. Slow down your anger by putting it off as long as possible.

James' third suggestion for controlling anger is connected to God's righteousness. He says, "... man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."

God wants everything to be right. He knows that a lot of things are wrong and he wants us to understand that anger doesn't make things right. Most human anger is because we don't like the way things are. If what we really want is to make things right, then we'd be smart to skip the anger and try a better way.

Some time ago I heard two great examples of people that did this. The first was in a community where a group of Christians were dissatisfied with a number of city officials. They felt that the police were unfair and that members of the city government were malicious and making bad decisions. They could have become angry, but they didn't. Instead, they made a commitment to pray daily for God's good in the life of every police officer, every member of the city council and every member of the school board. For the police officers they particularly prayed for safety. For the city officials they prayed for

their families and for wisdom in their decisions. At first this was not well received by the police department or by the others in the community. But after a long enough time their hearts were changed and God's righteousness resulted.

The second example is a comparison of two churches in San Francisco. The first church became angry with the gay community and received national publicity about the escalating confrontations between the church and militant gays. Another church nearby quietly reached out to the gay community with friendship and help, but not moral approval. The second church has

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deliberately stayed out of the limelight but has effectively reached hundreds of homosexuals for Jesus Christ.

Imagine if the Christians of America who are so angry took this approach instead — a biblical Christian approach that skipped the anger and did what is righteous.

We have a choice how to respond to situations that could anger us. James 1:20 tells us that human anger doesn't bring about the righteous life that God wants for us.

Look at the practical advice of Romans 12:17-21:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friend, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on this head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

As part of this lesson we're going to have a homework assignment. We will have one or

more opportunities to become angry in the next few days. We must decide if we're going to respond in our angry old way or in God's better new way.

When your turn comes, "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for (human) anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."

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