

Letting go of anger

One of the more startling things Jesus taught is in relation to anger. He said that anger is a form of murder. “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment.” (Mt 5:21-22 ASV)

Two objections rise immediately. Some readers will know that the KJV translation reads “angry... without a cause.” This phrase was inserted by early copyists for precisely the same reason we are shocked by Jesus’ teaching. Everyone gets angry! One of the reasons we can know that Jesus taught precisely that anger is a form of murder is because the phrase “without a cause” lets everyone off the hook, for who does not think his own anger is justified? We also see that James, the brother of Jesus, echoes Jesus’ teaching about anger in his NT letter (see James 2:11 and 4:2).

The other objection is that fact that Jesus is recorded as having been angry when He cleared the Temple (Jesus was actually angry on a number of other occasions, but that is the one people remember). I love Dr. Dallas Willard’s (THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY) comment about Jesus clearing the Temple. His comment was “Well, we can trust Jesus with His anger.”

We want to grab hold of Jesus’ purpose with the Sermon on the Mount. He was doing at least two things. One, He was teaching His disciples the nature of Kingdom righteousness—that it is an inner righteousness first, then becoming outward, produced by the working of the kingdom of God in the heart of His disciples. Second, His method of teaching involved the tearing-down of the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. These men were absolutely convinced that they had made themselves right with God by means of religious Law. They smugly believed that since they had never killed anyone, they were in the right. Jesus attempted to help them see (and by so doing taught His disciples the opposite lesson) that “not killing people” was an insufficient standard for moral righteousness. In fact, Jesus assured them that even when they were angry with someone, they had started on the path to murder.

This is why we feel wounded when someone we are close to is angry with us. We know down deep in that anger lays a seed of malice that would seek to harm us. Consider how many actual acts of murder would take place WITHOUT the presence of anger. Very few. Anger is part of the same plant that produces murder. Take Poison Ivy for an example. If we are to avoid it, we will stay away not only



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from the fully-formed three leaves, but also from the seedlings!

Jesus meant just what He said: “Every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment.” He knew that anger is an early form of murder. OK. What then does that mean for us, following Him as a disciple? Among other things it indicates that life in the kingdom of God enables us to let go of anger. Again, I appreciate Dr. Dallas Willard’s teaching on this subject. He says, “There is nothing done with anger that cannot be done better without it.” James, the brother of Jesus says it more simply: “Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life God desires.” (Jas 1:20)

Let’s be very clear at this point. ONE DOES NOT LET GO OF ANGER BY TRYING TO NOT BE ANGRY. If anything, trying not to be angry will probably just enhance your anger! No, the solution is found in becoming the KIND OF PERSON who is not easily angered. Can we agree that before angry responses became habit with us, there was a point (and still is) when we chose to relent to anger? If we are honest, we can all think of certain instances when we knew we did have control over whether we would give way to anger or not—and in a split-second decision we chose to give way. Anger is a choice we make. Granted, we have trained ourselves to respond angrily when certain “buttons” are pushed. Anger has for most of us become a habit, so that it really does seem beyond our deliberate control. Some people unfortunately thrive on their anger. Anger has become a “normal” part of their personality. For these folks, the decision to become the sort of person who is not easily angered becomes a decision about a whole new identity. But is that not what we all must choose as we decide to become a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth?

So how then do we become the kind of person who is not easily angered? The way is not complicated, though it will take a lifetime of attention. The clue is found in knowing WHY we get angry. Primarily, we get angry because

our will is thwarted. We don’t get our way. We see it in little children fighting over a favorite toy. We chuckle, but forget that similar impulses trigger our own anger. At a secondary level, we experience anger when we are scared or are hurt, but these also are forms of having our will thwarted. True, we are capable of “righteous anger,” but those situations honestly are very few and far between. Mostly we get angry because we don’t get what we want. (James 4:2) But in realizing that the cause of our anger is having our will thwarted, we are then in the amazing position to find the solution. What if we no longer worried about not getting our way because we had surrendered our will into the hands of a completely competent and trustworthy God?

This is a “no kidding” moment. To the extent that we REALLY believe that God is for us, in charge of us, and has promised to take care of us, to that same extent we are able to turn loose of anger. Whether the trigger is an unkind remark or a long line at the grocery store—it is no longer the end of the world for us. We can shrug our shoulders, and say (at least to God) “Father, I really did want _____ to happen. It didn’t. But I trust you, Lord. And I thank you for what you will do in spite of my not getting my way.”

This kind of God-confidence is only possible for one who is thoroughly surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you become convinced that God is trustworthy? Are you SURE that He can do a better job of managing your life than you? If you are not yet sure, then you are in for more anger and frustration. But if you relinquish control to Jesus, you can let go of your white-knuckled grip on the controls of your life (which only generates anger and frustration anyway) and you will begin to find inner peace. And in finding inner peace, you will begin to discover an ability to turn loose of anger when it rises, because you know that “not getting your way” is part of the bargain.

Please do not hurt yourself with self-condemnation as you learn to let go of anger. This process takes time and grace. But the old anger-management saying, “Don’t sweat the small stuff. Everything is small stuff,” really is true—provided that Almighty God is covering for you. Is it time for you to surrender?

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