

Anger — Righteous Indignation or Selfish Retaliation?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | May 9, 2019



Do you ever get angry? Recently, I was reading an article about marriage in which a Christian author was describing various indicators that might point to demonic oppression as a contributing cause to marital problems. One indicator he listed was “inappropriate anger.”

While I wouldn’t categorize all inappropriate anger as demonic, as I realize inappropriate anger can manifest due to unresolved traumas or unhealed wounds, I did have this thought: What is the difference between “appropriate anger” and “inappropriate anger?” Do people know? Can we easily identify the two types—and distinguish one from the other?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26 NIV84).

It seems Paul is describing a situation in which one could feel the emotion of anger, yet not be demonically influenced nor sinful for it.

What’s more, the Bible is filled with references to God being angry: “The Lord’s anger burns against his

people” (Isaiah 5:25 NIV84).

God certainly does not sin and, in fact, is slow to anger: “But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15 NIV84).

So, there must be some aspect of anger that is not sin. Yet, the Bible also describes anger as cruel and foolish and something to be avoided:

- “Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?” (Psalm 27:4 NIV84).
- “Mockers stir up a city, but wise men turn away anger” (Proverbs 29:8 NIV84).
- “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9 NIV84).

Moreover, the New Testament gives strong injunction that those who are becoming like Jesus are to get rid of all anger:

- “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31, 32 NIV84).
- “Now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Colossians 3:8 NIV84).

So, how do we make sense of anger? How can we be instructed to get rid of all anger—and that anger is unwise and for the fools—yet God is described as getting angry?

The issue is the motive and the focus of the anger:

- Righteous anger is always motivated by love for people and focuses on destroying the disease of sin in order to heal and save people
- Sinful anger is motivated by selfishness and focuses on punishing, hurting, or destroying people, while perpetuating sin and selfishness

Here is a simple example: Doctors have righteous anger toward pathogens (measles, polio, Ebola) and diseases (cancer, Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, etc.). They seek to destroy all disease and pathology to heal and save people. But doctors do not have anger toward sick and dying patients.

Of course, doctors do get angry at activities that spread disease, especially when it is purposely spread—HIV-infected individuals who spread the disease with dirty needles or unprotected sex. But doctors still love the addict or prostitute who is spreading the disease. It’s just that, while seeking to cure those currently infected, doctors also want to prevent the spread of the disease to protect all who are not yet infected.

Doctors also offer remedies for HIV and methods to stop its spread, but when a person refuses to take the remedy and to use methods that prevent infecting others, doctors get angry not only at the disease, but they also get angry at the refusal of the person who rejects the treatment. And how much greater the anger when the person who refuses lifesaving treatment is the doctor’s own son or daughter?

Why are the doctors angry? Because they love the dying person and know they can save them, if the terminal individual would only let them.

This is righteous anger—never seeking to harm the person, but always motivated by love to heal and save, even when a person refuses healing and chooses paths that destroy themselves and others. This is the anger that God expresses:

As the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice offering healing and restoration, do not reject the true Remedy and darken your minds as you did in the rebellion in the desert, during the opportunity to partake of God’s cure, where your fathers broke my heart by trying their own remedies and rejecting the truth which I brought and for forty years patiently tried to heal them. That is why I was so angry with what happened to that generation, and said, ‘Their minds continually reject the healing truth, and they refuse to practice my ways of health and live.’ So I granted them their persistent choice and said, ‘Since they refuse the truth—the Remedy I freely offer—they will never be able to enter my rest and get well’” (Hebrews 3:7-11 *The Remedy*).

Jesus also expressed anger at the hardness of heart that obstructed His healing love, but He still loved those whose hearts were hard:

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored (Mark 3:5, 6 NIV84).

And what does righteous anger, which is a manifestation of love, do to those who persistently refuse healing? It acts to restrain and to protect until the point that the person is healed or no further intervention will be helpful—and then love let’s go, with sadness, and allows the person to reap what they have chosen: pain, suffering, and death. *But it never retaliates*. Love is angry, because it didn’t have to be this way! Righteous anger doesn’t act to torture, inflict harm, or cause suffering and torment.

When Israel persistently rejected God and insisted on damaging their hearts, minds, and characters by engaging in idol worship, God—like a loving doctor whose patient refuses rehab and insists on injecting themselves with harmful substances—set them free to reap what they chose. Without God’s protecting presence, enemies of all sorts came in and attacked them; they reaped what they had chosen, a life separated from God.

And God was angry, because it didn’t have to be that way!

Selfish anger, however, is not motivated by love for others, nor is it angry at the suffering that sin is causing others. Rather, selfish anger is an anger about the wrongs we experience—done to us or to what we value—not for love for others. Examples of this include:

- Anger at not getting our way
- Anger at having our ideas challenged or refuted
- Anger at having our projects and pursuits interfered with
- Anger at having our self-promotion thwarted or name maligned
- Anger at being assaulted, injured, robbed
- Anger at having been embarrassed
- Anger of envy—someone else getting what we have wanted
- Anger of perceived unfairness—someone else having more than we do
- Anger when someone questions our authority, disobeys, or disrespects us
- Anger at having not lived up to the family standard

This type of anger leads to selfish acting out—seeking to take from another, hurt another, make another person pay for the wrong they have done to us, even killing another in order to protect self, advance self, or promote self. It wants to ensure the wrong is punished, not remedied. This is the anger of sin and selfishness.

Actions that impair our higher cortical functions (the part of the brain behind our foreheads, where we reason, think, and love) increase our vulnerability to selfish anger—such things as intoxication, sleep deprivation, frontal cortex brain damage from an injury or stroke, etc. Furthermore, ADHD, major depression, and having false beliefs that incite fear—including lies about God—increase the likelihood of sinful anger. Why? Because we *process* emotions and impulses in this area of the brain, and when this part of the brain is not operating at peak efficiency, we are more vulnerable to moments of angry outbursts, feeling it is the right and proper response to a perceived wrong. This gives insight into much of the Bible's counsel on avoiding drunkenness, getting appropriate rest, eating healthy foods, forgiving others, avoiding physical conflict, and the importance of knowing God as Jesus revealed Him to be.

If you find yourself angry, first inquire, with *what am I angry?* Is it because you love someone and you see them injuring themselves, or something injuring them, and you are angry at the pathology or process that is causing harm? Or are you angry at some wrong, actual or perceived, happening to you? Is your motive to act in love in order to save or heal another, or is your motive to act in vengeance—to punish or harm another?

If you find that your anger is selfish in nature, I encourage you to go to God in prayer and ask for a new heart and new motives—to give you love and help you change your perspective so that any anger you do have will be only the righteous anger of love toward the destruction of sin to bring healing to sinners—and never anger to harm the sinner.