

“Good and Angry”

The Theology and Practice of Healthy Anger

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Introduction

- Our emotions are an integral part of who we are as human beings made in God’s image. To be made in God’s image is to have emotions.
- Emotions are signals that give us information; as such, they’re neither good nor bad, just a type of mind-body reality that gives us information about ourselves.
- Emotions are like children in a car – you don’t want them in the driver’s seat, but you don’t want to put them in the trunk, either!
- An emotion is not something that “just happens” to you – you can modify the way you experience emotions.
- Anger is a “taboo” emotion. It often feels highly toxic.
 - For many people, “Anger = (D)anger”
 - Anger is like nuclear energy. We can get rid of nuclear energy ... but then we’d have to extinguish the sun!

Allow yourself to experience the full weight of your feelings. Allow them without censoring them. Then you can reflect and thoughtfully decide what to do with them. Trust God to come to you through them. This is the first step in the hard work of discipleship. (Peter Scazzero, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, p. 74)

What is Healthy Anger?

“Anger” – a name for the energy we feel when we need to:

1. protect ourselves
 - a. maintain our God-given boundaries.
 - like the body’s immune system
 - b. maintain our God-given integrity.
 - John 21:22 – “... what is that to you? You follow me!”
 - Nehemiah 6:2-4 – Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.
 - anger is often an expression of “healthy protest” against conformity, enmeshment, absorption, “assimilation,” etc.
2. protect the people/things for which God has made us responsible.
 - responding to injustice (e.g., seeing an adult hurt a child)

- Matthew 23:13 – “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”
3. overcome that which is blocking us from accomplishing our God-given tasks; anger can help us to focus our energies.
- Matthew 16:22-23 – Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”
 - 2 Corinthians 10:4-6 (*The Message*) – The tools of our trade aren’t for marketing or manipulation, but they are for demolishing that entire massively corrupt culture. We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ. Our tools are ready at hand for clearing the ground of every obstruction and building lives of obedience into maturity.

Anger becomes Unhealthy When ...

1. ... we’re trying to protect ourselves more than God wants us to.
 - Sometimes it’s right/best/healthiest to sacrifice, to surrender, to yield
 - ◆ John 12:24 – I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.
2. ... we’re trying to protect others more than God wants us to.
 - Sometimes it’s right/best/healthiest to “let others be”
 - ◆ e.g., allowing our children to make necessary mistakes and take necessary risks, in order for them to grow up.
 - ◆ e.g., allowing those we’re close with to make their own choices in their relationships with us.
3. ... it represents a “stuck-ness” in the process of “good grieving.” Sometimes we remain in the “anger” stage of grieving, in order to avoid moving forward toward the feeling-the-loss (“depression”) stage.
 - Psalm 56:8 (*The Message*) – You’ve kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless nights, each tear entered in your ledger, each ache written in your book.
 - Revelation 21:4 – He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

4. ... we forget that, with respect to injustice, God (and God alone) is able to right all wrongs.
 - 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 friends, 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 his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
5. ... we’re trying to eliminate or overcome obstacles that God wants us to accept.
 - a. Peter’s problem in Matthew 16.
 - b. Jeremiah 29:4-11 – “Build houses and settle down ...”
 - c. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change ...”

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (The Message)

Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, “My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

- d. Major Existential Issue!!! – Giving up, letting go, surrendering, accepting, grieving, “taking limitations in stride,” feels like death. Since we are “programmed” to keep on living and growing, and to maintain our boundaries, it takes grace from God to embrace His concept of the life cycle – which includes these things, but also includes resurrection!
6. ... we can’t turn it off. Like a malfunctioning immune system, sometimes our anger keeps on functioning long after it’s served its purpose, to our detriment and to the detriment of others.
 7. ... we’re stuck in our “narcissistic” stage
 - a. Anger as protest – against pain, loss, etc.
 - b. Anger as frustration – “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”
 - c. Anger as compensation – “I didn’t get it then, so I’m getting it now!”
 - d. Anger as entitlement – the “high chair tyrant.”

The Practice of Healthy Anger:

- To release or not to release?
 - Opinion #1 – full release is necessary in order to get “emotional clearance”

- Opinion #2 – full release unnecessarily reinforces angry feelings and behaviors.
- We **must** acknowledge our anger to God, to ourselves, and to another (safe) human being -- “I’m feeling really angry right now!”
- How to become less angry.
 1. “There is a God, and I’m not Him” – we can’t protect or fix everything, we can’t right all wrongs.
 2. “Good grieving.” Grieving is the process by which we respond to and recover from the experience of loss and trauma – physically, cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. It’s not possible to “not grieve,” but we can choose to grieve well.
 3. Don’t oppose God.
 - Gamaliel’s speech, Acts 5:28-29 – “Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”
 - “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”
 4. Enter into a disciplined process of growing up.
 - Change your mind, perspective, point of view. You **can** modify the way you experience your emotions.
 - Event → belief → response (e.g., anger). If I change my belief, I change my response.
 - Practice (healthy) self-soothing.
 - Breathe.
 - “How important is it?,” “Easy does it.”
 - Embrace the “existential” realities that
 - life is hard,
 - you are going to die,
 - you are not that important,
 - you are not in control, and
 - your life is not (fully, exclusively) about you (from Richard Rohr, [Adam’s Return](#)).
 - Take full responsibility:
 - “I take full responsibility for my anger.”
 - “I feel angry ... and it’s not your fault.”
 - Remain committed to caring for the other person.
 - Listening well
 - Both/and: “I hear you and I sympathize with you; I feel differently.”

Practical Applications

- Listen to your anger – what is your anger telling you? How is God “coming to you” in your anger?
 - Take an “anger inventory” – Who? What? Why? Where? When?
- Community – finding safe, open and non-judgmental people/groups in which to process your anger.
- Keep short accounts – get “emotional clearance” sooner rather than later.
 - “Emotions are like vegetables, they’re best when they’re fresh.”
 - Ephesians 4:26-27 (*The Message*) – Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don’t stay angry. Don’t go to bed angry. Don’t give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.
- My response to another’s anger:
 - Get safe (both outside and in)
 - Self-soothing (pray, “recollect” yourself, use the phone, etc.)
 - Connect in an understanding, sympathetic, respectful manner
- Conflict resolution – we need an environment (and sometimes a 3rd party) that can serve as a “container” for the anger of both parties, so that each party can **process** her/his anger well, and then be able to move on to the **content** of the conflict.