

Life Issues • Anger

A series that investigates and offers insights regarding challenging life issues

“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.”

Ephesians 4:26

Rob has been a Christian for 16 years. He loves the Lord, has a great family and a job that puts food on the table. He’s also active in his church. To most, Rob is a wonderful Christian example, but to those who know him best, he can also be a time bomb ready to explode with anger. Rob’s wife, Beth, loves him deeply, but has been afraid when his angry words and yelling turn him into a stranger. She’s especially fearful of what his anger seems to be doing to their children. They are growing distant toward Rob and have increasingly begun acting out in anger toward one another. Beth is afraid to bring up her concerns because his reactions are unpredictable. So, she continues to pray, trying her best not to make waves. At the same time, he tries to manage his frustrations by clamming up. That, however, does not mean he allows others to have their way. Instead, he complains behind people’s backs. Often times, his initial attempt to not say anything in order to avoid hurting someone’s feelings ends up hurting several people in the end.

Though fictitious, this scenario is being played out in many homes. Nearly all of us come into adulthood with the residual effects of difficult childhood experiences and the lies we believe about them. We learn coping mechanisms along the way to manage the effects of those lies as they are triggered. For someone like Rob, the compulsive anger may derive from a belief that he must control circumstances to keep from feeling pain.

All this is not to say anger is always negative. God’s righteous anger is mentioned 18 times in the Old Testament and in the New Testament Jesus became angry with those who misled others. Actually, “anger is a God-given emotion which indicates unresolved tension within a person’s spirit. It is anger’s motives, forms of expression and effects that determine whether it is sinful or appropriate.”¹ At times Rob may have righteous anger about things that also anger God. Other times it may come out of his inability to constructively deal with or identify his emotions.

Maybe he felt unloved or misunderstood as a child and, somewhere along the way, vowed never to be close to or hurt by people. Or, perhaps there was an unwritten rule in his family that expressing emotions and opinions was not allowed. He may have been told crying wasn’t for little boys or that his opinions weren’t valid. On the other hand, the anger he witnessed may have been expressed in rage and belittlement. This may have led him to vow never to get angry. He still holds to that vow today, pushing down any feelings of anger or disagreement.

In these kinds of environments, children are not taught to identify their feelings or understand how to express them in a healthy manner. As they grow up, they often fear situations and relationships which expect them to do so. Like Rob they bring the

“rules” and admonitions about emotions with them into adulthood. In this way, they may successfully block out some of the potential pain in life, but they also close out authentic love and acceptance for and from others.

Unfortunately, Rob’s method of managing emotions only lasts so long before the proverbial cork pops and anger or other unwanted emotions surface. Even if he’s successful at keeping these emotions at bay, he risks other side effects, including a variety of health issues associated with suppressed emotions. We were not created to hold these powerful feelings inside. God calls us to walk in the light and openly work through matters of disagreement, misunderstanding and frustration. By doing so, we can actually deepen and grow in our relationships. While adults in Rob’s childhood may have sinned by punishing him for his feelings, today it is up to him, with the help of the Lord, to humbly learn godly and healthy ways of dealing with emotions.

As a child, Rob did not know God’s Word directs us to not let the sun go down on our anger. We’re directed to clear up issues of anger in a productive and timely manner so that they don’t grow and end up leaving scars. To Rob, anger was wrong, so he determined to stuff it down. Left unchecked, even his “righteous anger” can turn into bitterness, contempt and exploitation.

If you are dealing with compulsive anger tendencies, honestly consider if you consistently possess more than a few of the following hidden signs of anger²:

- Depression
- Chronic sarcasm, impatience and resentful pessimism
- Expectations of perfection in self and others
- Frequent stress-related illnesses
- A critical spirit
- Outbursts of yelling or physical abuse
- Tendency to gossip or not cooperate
- Legalistic attitudes
- Demanding or domineering attitudes
- Unwillingness to see or admit your faults or weaknesses
- Areas of unforgiveness toward others
- Harsh attitudes toward various people groups
- Difficulty expressing emotions or being vulnerable
- Contempt toward those who do share emotions

If you’ve determined that you are one of many who struggle with compulsive, unhealthy anger, it is important to realize you need more than a strong desire and good intentions to manage this powerful emotion. Following are some good first steps to take as you address unhealthy patterns of anger:

- Take responsibility for the presence of unresolved, lie-based thinking and actions that lead to sinful ways and cause you to lose control of your emotions. Ask the Lord to show you if there’s anything He wants you to see about your anger.

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- Commit to not blame others for your irritations. See them as triggers for what is already present inside you. You may have legitimate anger about the sin you see in others, but problems arise when you allow your reaction to overtake your life, lead you to sin, or blind you to your own faults.
- Recognize you will never control people or circumstances. Give that attempt to control over to God. Seek to develop your relationship with our sovereign God who is the source of all emotional healing. Be open to new places He desires for you.
- Do your own mistakes or those of others create agitation and irritation in you? Give yourself the freedom to make mistakes by asking Jesus to find the source of your need for perfection.
- Find the source and origin of your dependence upon the “nice guy” or “she’s so sweet” label that enables you to avoid dealing with necessary conflict up-front. Instead, use your frustrations and emotions to lead you to where you first learned to avoid pain in this way. Ask Jesus to show you the truth about how to deal with conflict in healthy, open ways.

One great motivation to resolving anger issues is the potential for satisfying, healthy relationships and personal peace. God makes it clear that this takes effort. Letting anger grow leads to bitterness and other troubles. His Word warns against letting bitterness grow, but it also provides us with ways of guarding against these troubles by finding healing and forgiveness.

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” —Hebrews 12:14-15

Like Rob’s wife, many spouses and friends also need to consider how they contribute to the problem of someone else’s anger issues. If you sweep their unnecessary, disrespectful, angry reactions under the carpet, you are not doing them or yourself any favors. Your avoidance of confronting difficult behavior is just as sinful. On the other hand, your healthy confrontation can motivate them to seek ministry for the painful emotions being triggered. The Lord calls us to honesty and integrity in relationships. Avoiding these issues just corrupts relationships and enables someone to continue unhealthy patterns.

“But if we walk in the Light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.” —1 John 1:7

The reasons behind your anger may go deep below the surface of your current irritations. A great way to start dealing with anger is to humbly seek the Lord through healing prayer. Find a trusted friend to pray with and seek out some of the resources below to help you on the road to healing. For additional scripture on anger, also read 2 Chronicles 15-16; Mark 3:1-6 and 11:25; Ephesians 4:30-32; Colossians 3:5-17; 1 Timothy 2:8; and James 1:19-26.

Tearing Down the High Places

King Josiah's reign was blessed by the Lord because he "did not turn aside from doing what was right" (2 Chronicles 34:2) and he went to great lengths to purify the cities under His rule. We too must do the work of removing from our lives the places, things, people and thoughts that cause us to wander from God's ways. King Josiah saw to it that the altars for the images of Baal and their incense altars were torn down. He also made sure that the Asherah poles, the carved idols and the cast images were smashed (1 Chronicles 34:4). For this, He and His people were blessed and protected. **What things in your life clearly have the potential of leading you down a wrong path? Are you holding on to things, thoughts, memories or people which lead to anger, bitterness, lust or other unholy behaviors and choices?** Like God's people in the time of Josiah, if we humble ourselves and recognize how we have strayed, He will surely hear us and save us from the disaster that may have awaited us. As ironic as it may be, there is freedom in the constraint of the Holy Spirit!

Pastor John Piper provides an illustration to this kind of freedom. "There are sensations of unbounded independence that are not true freedom because they deny truth and are destined for calamity. For example, two women may jump from an airplane and experience the thrilling freedom of free-falling. But there is a difference: one is encumbered by a parachute on her back and the other is free from this burden. Which person is most free? The one without the parachute feels free—even freer, since she does not feel the constraints of the parachute straps. But she is not truly free. She is in bondage to the force of gravity and to the deception that all is well because she feels unencumbered. This false sense of freedom is in fact bondage to calamity which is sure to happen after a fleeting moment of pleasure."

Everything around you may tell you to do whatever feels right. Do not be deceived. The Lord's ways are perfect and mean to lead us to freedom and life. Choose life today!

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him.” —Deuteronomy 30:19

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” —Psalm 51:17

"What's the Difference?" by John Piper; Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois; ©1990

- **Assessment and Referral Counseling**
Katherine Bentley, Care Ministries, 763-971-5123
 - **Freedom Ministry** (freedom from strongholds)
 - **Theophostic Ministry** (inner-healing prayer)
- See www.cefc.com/care/victoriousliving.html.

Brochures on each of these ministries are available in the CEFC Information Centers or call Care Ministries at **763-971-5123**. 

^{1,2}Counseling Insights, a Biblical Perspective on Caring for People—Anger; ©1997 Insight for Living.

When Anger Hits Home; Gary Jackson Oliver and H. Norman Wright; ©1992 Moody Press; pgs. 236 and 237.