

A THERAPIST'S GUIDE TO ANGER

From my experience, it seems that anger is the most misunderstood, abused, and vilified emotion. Considering how prevalent expressions of anger seem to be in daily interactions (just take note of the division in our world!)—whether in “real life” or within the social media space—it is amazing that so many struggle to name anger or know what to do with it. This mishandling can be amplified in the Church, as anger itself can be unilaterally interpreted as sinful, and therefore dismissed.

However, emotions, as part of our embodied experience, can offer valuable information not just for our relationships with other people, but also with God. Our experience of emotion is certainly fallen, but there is still a reflection of what it means to be made in God’s image. In that view, anger is worth paying attention to.

UNDERSTANDING ANGER

We know that God created anger and even exhibits it Himself in His anger toward sin and injustice. That alone should reveal to us that anger itself is not inherently sinful. On a human level, then, it’s important to try to understand how anger can be helpful. I often describe anger as the emotion that appears to prompt us to fight or advocate for someone or something—ourselves, a loved one, a vulnerable person/group, or a cause.

At its best, anger reminds us to fight for what is just and right (reflecting God’s perfect righteousness and justice). Acknowledging anger also brings depth to realizing the cost of forgiveness. At its worst, anger centers on selfish desires/entitlements—reflecting an unrighteousness that elevates the self).

In either case....that is critical information! A righteous anger brings us closer to the heart of God as we identify with His justice. It can serve as a motivator to do good in the world and fight for “the least of these.” It can also prompt us to reflect on whether we have been wronged by the sin of another so we can pursue forgiveness and possible reconciliation. In recognizing selfish anger, on the other hand, we can identify the ways in which pride has elevated our standing over others and repent of where we have failed to submit. It’s possible that we have chosen to fight for our own perceived needs/desires that are actually ungodly.

IDENTIFYING ANGER

When I ask someone about the possible role of anger in their life, it’s often dismissed because they are envisioning some extreme example—wanting to yell or punch a wall, perhaps. It’s important to recognize, though, that all core emotions exist on a spectrum. The core emotion of “anger” can look very different depending on the person or the circumstance. For instance, take a look at these emotions under anger on a feelings wheel:

Threatened	Critical	Devastated	Enraged	Suspicious
Hateful	Disapproving	Insecure	Provoked	Skeptical
Mad	Disappointed	Jealous	Hostile	Sarcastic
Aggressive	Awful	Resentful	Infuriated	
Frustrated	Avoidant	Violated	Irritated	
Distant	Embarrassed	Furious	Withdrawn	

I imagine that right now, it would be easier for you to name “hateful” as an expression of anger compared to “withdrawn.” However, they come from the same core emotion, which tells us that at some level, we perceive that a boundary has been crossed or a wrongdoing has occurred.

It’s important to note that this may not necessarily be the truth—but it absolutely speaks to how we are *interpreting* reality.

In understanding discipleship as ever increasing submission to the lordship of Jesus, there is value in practicing awareness of an emotion like anger. I encourage you to think about the more subtle ways anger

might show up in your own life. Oftentimes, we may not consciously identify a feeling as anger, but our bodies physically let us know it's there. Perhaps we feel heat, tension, trembling, or a quickened heart rate. Paying attention to our bodies can help us learn patterns about our own emotions (and therefore, interpretations) when words fail.

ACTING ON ANGER

What to do once we identify the presence of anger?

- 1. Spent time reflecting on/praying about what anger is telling you. Making space for it allows for deeper examination. Ask the Spirit to bring clarity and conviction.**
 - What is your anger telling you about your expectations?
 - On whose behalf are you looking to fight/advocate for?
 - If advocating for yourself, what is your motive? What is the basis for how you expect to be treated?
 - What does your anger say about who/what you love?
- 2. Acknowledge/name the anger. Consider...**
 - Acknowledging the anger internally ("I'm feeling upset because _____")
 - And/or acknowledging your anger before God through prayer
 - And/or acknowledging your anger to one who has wronged you
- 3. If you find that your anger is unrighteous/selfish, confess to God.**
 - Confess the ways your anger is misaligned with God's desires
 - Consider how the Gospel speaks to your entitlement and pride. How does the Cross level reality and bring perspective to what ultimately matters?
 - Consider the humility and sacrificial nature of Jesus
- 4. If you find that your anger is righteous, consider how God is leading you to act on it:**
 - Where are you being led to fight for justice?
 - Can a loving conversation with the wrongdoer bring awareness of sin and the need for repentance?
 - Does your anger indicate the need for a protective boundary to be set?
 - Is your anger prompting you to pursue forgiveness and possible reconciliation?
 - How can you resist the temptation to express your anger unhealthily?

ANGER AND PEOPLE-PLEASING

For many, anger can seem foreign and/or frightening because it is associated with a lack of safety—even on a visceral, implicit level. A "fawn response" (or chronic people-pleasing tendency) favors maintaining peace at all costs—including ignoring anger. This can often lead to inauthentic relationships and growing resentment as needs are not identified/expressed, as well as the flourishing of mistreatment that goes unnamed/unchallenged. It can also lead to quick "forgiveness" that fails to acknowledge the cost.

For many, the thought of acknowledging anger or confronting others is associated with abandonment or real/perceived threat to safety. While theologically, we can remind each other of the pitfalls of idolizing others, it's important to understand that this kind of response can actually be hardwired into our nervous system through trauma and abuse. The beauty, though, is that God can heal and restore, and He often does so through His people.

We can go a long way in helping to heal such responses as we create safe, confessional spaces that eagerly acknowledge our failings before a holy God. Doing so allows us to turn toward another with love, humility, and gentleness as we are assured of our own reconciled standing with Him. When we receive rebuke non-defensively and invite the Holy Spirit to work in us through such feedback, we not only welcome our own sanctification, but also encourage safety in those whom God is calling to take such risks.

A healthy understanding of anger—at both the individual and community levels—can lead us to pursue justice and restoration. It also adds weight to the cost of forgiveness and our understanding of grace.