

What Our Anger is Telling Us

Anger is not good for you, at least not in its typical form.

New studies argue that regular feelings of anger increase the likelihood for heart disease, and that within two hours of an outburst, the chances of a heart attack or stroke skyrocket. Which means all you angry folks better watch out; it's a dangerous foible.

But wait. Anger is more than a problem for "you angry people." It is actually a problem for all of us — that includes you and me.

Traditionally, the anger issue has been divided up between those who get angry and those who don't. Some personalities tend toward red-faced eruptions; others are unflappably relaxed and easy-going. But the truth is, *everyone* gets angry — it's just expressed in different ways. Neurophysiologist Nerina Ramlakham says, "Now we separate people differently into those who hold rage in and those who express it out" ("Why Anger Is Bad for You"). The question, then, isn't *who* gets angry, but *why* we all get angry.

And why we get angry has to do with love.

The Love Behind Anger

Anger doesn't come out of nowhere. It's not an original emotion. In one degree or another, anger is our response to whatever endangers something we love. "In its uncorrupted origin," says Tim Keller, "anger is actually a form of love" ("The Healing of Anger"). Anger is *love in motion* to deal with a threat to someone or something we truly care about. And in many ways, it *can* be right.

It is right that we get angry with the delivery guy who speeds down our street when our kids are playing in the front yard. That makes sense. The delivery guy puts our children in danger. It also would be right that we get angry about Boko Haram's hideous evil in Nigeria. It is unbelievably horrible.

But if we're honest, as much as there are right instances for our anger, most of our anger isn't connected to the incidental dangers surrounding our children or the wicked injustices happening across the world. As much as we love our children and care about innocent victims, our anger typically points to other loves — disordered loves, as Keller calls them.

Those Inordinate Affections

Disordered loves, or “inordinate affections,” as Augustine called them, are part of the age-old problem of taking good things and making them ultimate. It’s the slippery terrain that goes from really loving our children to finding our identity in them, to thinking that our lives are pointless without the prosperity of our posterity. It’s that insidious shift that turns blessings into idols. And when our loves get disordered, our anger goes haywire.

We’ll find ourselves getting annoyed at the simplest, most harmless things — the things that really shouldn’t make us mad. Keller explains,

There’s nothing wrong with being ticked — getting angry to a degree — if somebody slights your reputation, but why are you ten times — *a hundred times* — more angry about it than some horrible violent injustice being done to people in another part of the world?

Do you know why? . . . Because . . . if what you’re really looking to for your significance and security is people’s approval or a good reputation or status or something like that, then when anything gets between you and the thing you have to have, you become implacably angry. You have to have it. You’re over the top. You can’t shrug it off.

If we find ourselves angry about getting snubbed in social media, or being cut off in traffic, or going unrecognized for work, or having an idea shut down, or feeling underappreciated by our spouse — the problem might be that we love ourselves too much.

Three Steps Out

So what do we do? If anger is everyone’s problem, and if it often exposes our disordered loves, how do we break free from its claws? Here are three steps out.

1. Analyze the anger.

We must get into the details of anger and understand its source. It means that when we find ourselves getting angry — when those emotions start to rise up — we stop and ask: “What is this big thing that’s so important to me that I get this defensive?” *What am I loving so much right now that my heart is moved to feel angry?*

“If you ask that question,” says Keller, “if you do this analysis, more often than not you’ll immediately be embarrassed, because many, many times the thing you’re defending is your ego, your pride, your self-esteem.”

2. Feel sorrow for our sin.

We may feel embarrassed after asking these questions, or worse. Nothing is more ugly than opening the lid of our hearts to find this kind of corruption. But as rancid as it might be, we can face the fright with a bold sorrow. We are bold because the corruption, present though it is, cannot condemn us, or defeat us. Jesus has paid the price for that disordered love. He bore the wrath we deserved, freeing us from sin's guilt. He rose from the dead, empowering us over sin's dominion.

And then there is sorrow. We are rightfully sad for how slow our souls are in receiving God's grace. We are sad that we find ourselves more perturbed by our wounded ego than we are by the abortions that take place downtown, that we shake our fists at rude media more than we lift our hands to heal the broken, that we inwardly mock those who disagree with us more than we publicly defend the rights of the voiceless. We are sad about that in our depths with a kind of serious sadness that isn't content to leave it there. We are grieved into repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9–10). We turn, we say, *No more, Lord. Please, no more.*

3. Remember the love of Jesus.

The obvious solution to disordered love is ordered love. But we can't flip a switch for that. We can't just stop loving one object wrongly to start loving the most lovable object rightly — that is, unless we're strengthened by the Spirit to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:14–19).

When our eyes are opened to see and savor Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6), when we're overcome by his grace (2 Corinthians 8:8–9), *then* we're led to love him more than anything — and so increasingly care about the things that matter, and grow in not becoming angry when we shouldn't be.

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