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HOW TO BE GOOD AND ANGRY

Not to be angry when we should be is just as sinful as being angry when we should not be.

By ARNOLD KURTZ

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Thoreau’s observation seems especially pertinent today, when around the world there seems to be a sense of futility in the face of political and economic uncertainty.

Nestled in a list of practical counsels in the Bible are two seemingly contradictory imperatives—a positive one, “Be . . . angry,” and a negative, “Sin not” (Eph. 4:26). There is sound scholarship in favor of the view that the imperative, “Be . . . angry,” commands a habitual displeasure with evil. Of course, we are told also to put away anger (verse 31), and “put off . . . anger” (Col. 3:8). Jesus warned that “every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:22, R.S.V.). But these admonitions do not destroy the sense of the imperative found in Ephesians 4, for anger also is attributed to God and to Christ, and They do not sin. The identical term is used in the Greek of Ephesians 4:26 and Matthew 5:22 to refer both to a Godlike anger, which is virtuous, and to anger mingled with violence, which is sinful.

In her comments on the Sermon on the Mount, Ellen White makes this distinction: “There is an indignation that is justifiable, even in the followers of Christ. When they see that God is dishonored, and His service brought into disrepute, when they see the innocent oppressed, a righteous indignation stirs the soul. *Such anger*, born of sensitive morals, *is not a sin*. But those who at any supposed provocation feel at liberty to indulge anger or resentment are opening the heart to Satan.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 310. (Italics supplied.)

The command to “be . . . angry” may be viewed, then, as a summons to righteous indignation. It is a call to be good—and angry! And it is needed today if Christians are to stand against the deteriorating stream of our culture. One of our paralyzing weaknesses is our inability to be angry about the *-right* things.

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Old Testament prophets knew how and when to be angry. Feel the holy heat of Elijah’s anger as he challenged Ahab’s idolatry; or the holy wrath of Isaiah’s judgment, “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room” (Isa. 5:8, R.S.V.). Anger is in the nostrils of Amos as he thunders, “Hear this, you who trample upon the needy . . .” (Amos 8:4-6, R.S.V.).

Jesus was angry too—angry at hypocrisy and legalism that ran roughshod over mercy. He drove the money-changers from the Temple. His anger was the wrath of God. Our God is a God of anger, “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18, A.S.V.).

The message to Christians is clear. There is a need for the recovery of holy anger. Our weakness is our silence; our powerlessness is our neutrality. There is a need for the tiger in life, and when the tiger becomes a tabby cat, something important is lost. Paul leans across the centuries to shake us out of our complacency—“Be . . . angry”!

Must be angry in God’s way

But we must be sure that ours is the righteous anger of God. It is easy to be angry in the wrong way and at the wrong things. George Matheson, the Scottish hymn-writer and preacher, once said, “There are times when I do well to be angry, but I have mistaken the times.” If we are to be good and angry we must be angry in God’s way and at the things about which God Himself is indignant.

What are the characteristics of *righteous* indignation? What is *good* anger?

Good anger is unselfish—it is inspired and animated by unselfish considerations. The common garden variety of anger is rooted in selfishness. It shows itself as personal pique arising out of damage to our pocketbooks, prestige, ego, or self-esteem.

Our indignation that our expensive automobile tires

are being torn to shreds by potholes while our elected politicians seem indifferent to the problem is understandable, but probably not righteous.

A fundamental mark of holy anger is that it boils over, not at the wrongs done to self, but at the wrongs done to others. Look at Jesus. There is not one instance in which He spoke in anger because He was personally mistreated—not even in connection with the indignities He suffered at His trial or crucifixion. But at the sight of wrongs done to others—when widows were robbed, parents or children abused or neglected—His anger was aroused and expressed: “It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones” (Luke 17:2). Whereas the anger of Jesus was motivated by the violation of justice, the purpose of His opponent’s anger was to destroy and to kill.

The biographer of Frederick W. Robertson, famous preacher of the nineteenth century, says of him that “the indignation with which he heard of a base act was so intense that it rendered him sleepless.” He was seen walking down the street in Brighton once with a face terrific as the furies, grinding his teeth in rage. He had just heard of a man plotting the ruin of a fine girl whom he knew. “With those who were weak, crushed with remorse, fallen, his compassion, long-suffering and tenderness were as beautiful as they were unflinching. But falsehood, hypocrisy, the sin of the strong against the weak, stirred him to the very depths of his being.”—Stopford A. Brooke, *Life and Letters of Frederick W. Robertson*, p. 106. Good anger, the kind that is not sinful, is unselfish. It is not motivated by personal reasons or motives.

Good anger is focused and directed not at people, but at things that hurt people. It is directed against wrong deeds, things, institutions, and situations—not against the wrongdoer, but his wrong; not against the sinner, but his sin.

Is this possible? C. S. Lewis reminds us that we do this all the time with one person—self: “However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did these things.”—*Mere Christianity*, pp. 92, 93.

Perhaps in this way it also is easier to understand expressions regarding “the wrath of God.” God’s anger is a sign that He cares. If He did not care about us He would not be angry about what we do. I wonder about parents who never get angry at the conduct of their children. Someone has pointed out that the more a man loves his son, the more he will hate the liar, the bully, and the cheat in that son. Sentimentality, not love, is calm about these things; love is pained by anything that threatens or diminishes the worth or potential of a person.

Good anger results in creative and constructive ac-

tion. The wrath of God against sin led Him to take decisive action to rescue sinners. Jesus Christ, while angry at the wrongs done to people, at the same time went about doing good, correcting these wrongs.

Today’s angry people express themselves in protest rallies and demonstrations, waving placards, shouting slogans, but they have no proposals to correct the wrongs they protest. They “do not see the vital point, that ’tis the eighth most deadly sin to wail, ‘The world is out of joint,’ and not attempt to put it in.”—Hubert Simpson, *Put Forth by the Moon*.

During the early part of this century, the college student Clifford Beers experienced a severe emotional breakdown. He was appalled at the conditions that he found in the mental institution where he was hospitalized, and the primitive treatment that the patients endured. He recorded carefully the injustices and indignities. After recovery he assisted in the founding of several mental-health organizations. His angry protests and appeals before State legislatures across the country resulted in vastly improved treatment for a new generation of emotionally ill patients.

Righteous anger not only protests but also proposes; raises not only its voice to object but its hand to remedy.

Must be under control

Good anger is controlled anger. Anger is a driving force. It causes adrenalin to flow into the bloodstream to prepare us for fight or flight. If it is to be constructive it must be like the explosions in the engines of our automobiles. These little measured explosions, under the control of purpose, enable us to arrive at our destinations. If, in the interest of saving time and effort, we decided to light all the gasoline in the tank at once we would never reach our earthly destination!

After Paul advises us to “be . . . angry,” he adds quickly that we should do this in such a way that we “sin not.” This admonition can be followed if we do not let “the sun go down” on our anger (Eph. 4:26). That is, the expression of anger should not be delayed, stored up for a future outburst, or nursed as a grudge. Anger must not be maintained beyond appropriate boundaries.

James adds another guideline: “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19, R.S.V.). Just as delayed and stored-up anger is sin, so is hasty, thoughtless anger. Anger, properly directed and controlled, can be good. It also can be dangerous. Improperly directed and uncontrolled, it provides an opening for Satan (Eph. 4:27).

This powerful emotion presents us with a great challenge. We are not godly if in the presence of wrong we have no feelings that can be called anger. But if our anger is righteous, it must be neither too quick nor too slow. This is not easy, and we may not always use anger properly. When we err we must be quick to confess to God and to the person against whom we have sinned. But we err also when we attempt to skirt the problem by never getting angry at anything. □