

Controlling the Fires *of Anger*

I WAS THE PERFECT vacation plan. My family and I would spend 10 days on a Florida beach after visiting Disney World in Orlando. Being a frugal person, I arranged for our family to spend two nights at a motel free of charge—all we had to do was to attend a time-share presentation. No problem. We had attended one before with this same company. It was brief and painless. The meeting was at 9:00 the next morning. We'd be out in 15 minutes and on our way to see Mickey and Minnie before the gates opened.

Three hours into the sales presentation, I was seething with anger. My plans had been thwarted. The sales person did not deliver on several things she had promised. I was being made to feel guilty because, in the sales associate's words, I did not want to "experience luxury living for a week every year for the rest of my life." Hurriedly, we walked through the condo and returned to the main lobby where we stood in line to retrieve our deposit money. The sales person, in an attempt to make small talk asked, "I hope you had an enjoyable experience."

By this time I was boiling. "No," I said, "I didn't have an enjoyable experience. I told you we weren't interested, yet you went through the whole presentation. Then you tried to make me feel guilty for not signing up today. You promised information throughout the presentation, yet you did not deliver. You lied to me. My family won't talk to me. I promised to have them at Disney World when it opened and now we will be lucky to arrive by noon."

We were at the teller's window when I finished my remarks. The sales associate said to the young lady behind the window, "He's not a happy camper." The teller asked sarcastically, "Well, are we having a bad day?"

Honestly, I had to grit my teeth, hold back my temper—no, my rage. After all, I was a minister and ministers aren't suppose to lose their cool, especially in public. I was so angry I wanted to reach through the window and strangle her.

The Essence of Anger

Regina Barreca wrote in the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, "Anger is . . . an itch, an allergic reaction to some little piece of life's pollen blown your way." Of all

emotions, anger is one of the most common and powerful. I rarely make it through a day without experiencing anger—either my own or that of someone with whom I interact. My flight is delayed. The traffic is jammed. My daughter walks on the new carpet with muddy shoes. A drunken driver kills three students at the local high school. These particles of pollen cause my face to turn red, my heart to race, and my eyes to water. The fire rages within. Anger is intensely personal. It is the quintessential signature emotion: I am what makes me mad.

Anger and the Bible

Anger is not always sin. And not all anger is wrong. The apostle Paul wrote, "In your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). In the Old Testament, God became angry at the sin and wickedness of his people. In the New Testament, God's Son became indignant over the misuse of the temple. And we are instructed to express our anger, but not to become full of wrath and hatred. Still, anger can lead to sin. There is a difference between "an angry person" and "a person who is angry." An angry person is one who is controlled by anger—the fire is out of control leading to sin. A person who is angry, on the other hand, may be someone who has allowed a bit of life's pollen from a certain event or person to ignite his anger—it's a fire, but not a wildfire.

Controlling Anger

Someone said, "Your temper is one of your most valuable possessions. Don't lose it." Solomon wrote, "If you cannot control your anger you are helpless as a city without walls, open to attack" (Proverbs 25:28, *Good News*). "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (Proverbs 29:11, *New International Version*). Aristotle was right when he said, "Anybody can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy." If I can't control my anger, it will control me. So how do I keep the fires of my anger under control?

I can't bury my anger. When my wife and I were in London one spring, we learned that some of the bombs dropped on England during the war are still killing people. They turn up

and sometimes explode at construction sites, in fishing nets, or on beaches. Undetected bombs become more dangerous with time because corrosion can expose the detonator. What is true of bombs that are not dealt with is also true of people who have unresolved anger. Buried anger explodes when we least expect it.

When anger explodes, it does all sorts of damage. It severs relationships. It causes ulcers. It leads to murder. When anger is turned inward, it leads to depression. When it is turned outward, it leads to aggression. So I have to deal with my anger, not bury it.

Sophia Petrillo of *The Golden Girls* said, "Anger is like shredded wheat caught under your dentures. If you leave it there, you get a blister and you have to eat Jell-O for a week. If you get rid of it, the sore heals and you feel better."

I must avoid chronically angry people. Solomon wrote, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared" (Proverbs 22:24, 25). Anger is contagious. It is dangerous to associate closely with people for whom anger has become a chronic way of life.

I must take time to cool off. Dr. Carol Travis, author of *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion* (Touchstone, 1982), advises, "Never speak in the heat of anger. You say things badly or wrongly. Give yourself time to cool off because you want your anger to accomplish something." Psalm 37:8 says, "Bridle your anger, trash your wrath, cool your pipes—it only makes things worse" (Psalm 37:8, *The Message*).

When I am angry, my mouth often runs faster than my mind. Someone said, "A sharp tongue cuts your throat." Thomas Jefferson said, "If you are angry, count to 10, if you are very angry, count to 100."

When I feel the fires of anger heating up, I ask myself, "Is this anger really worth what it's going to do to others and me emotionally? Will I make a fool of myself? Will I hurt someone I love? Will I lose a friend? Am I seeing this event from the other person's point of view?" I have come to realize that some things simply are not worth my anger. I can win some battles and still lose the war. I try to remember what Seneca said: "The greatest cure for anger is delay."

I must choose to forgive. Anger is a choice. I am reminded of that every time I am in an

argument with my wife and the phone rings. If you are like me, you don't answer the phone with the same tone of voice you have been using with your spouse. In a split second, I can go from screaming to a sweet voice as I say, "Hello." If anger is a choice, so is forgiveness. I can control my anger by choosing forgiveness over anger. The apostle Paul wrote, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31, 32). Forgiveness is surrendering my right to hurt you because you hurt me. It means that when I am the object of anger I don't deserve, I can choose to forgive by not striking back.

Forgiveness and anger cannot live together. I cannot be resentful and forgiving at the same time. If anger is a fire, then forgiveness is the water that puts out the fire.

I would like to say that following my unpleasant experience with the Florida property company, I went back to the sales associate and the lady at the window and asked their forgiveness, but I did not. But, hopefully, next time I will. In the meantime, I need to learn how to lower the temperature of my anger. ■

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