



From Coping to Cure

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 17: ANGER IS ONE LETTER AWAY FROM DANGER

THOUGHT STARTER:

Is being a little bit angry like being a little bit pregnant?

Put off . . . anger, wrath, malice.

Colossians 3:8, NKJV

It is not very often that an author describes a session with his counselor. Jay Carty did just that and I happened to be the counselor.

I was on my way to teach a class at a Christian college when I was given a note requesting that I return a long distance phone call from Jay. I returned his call and he wanted to set up an appointment. We agreed on 2:00 p.m. that day and I hurried on to teach my class. In my rush to get to class on time, I did not make any notation about the appointment.

After class, a student invited me to play racquetball at 1:30 p.m. Our play was interrupted by a phone call: Jay Carty wanted to know why I hadn't kept my appointment.

I showered and dressed as quickly as possible, but I was still about an hour late. On the way to the appointment I breathed a prayer to the Lord to help me handle a very embarrassing situation. I walked into the room where a very understandably irate Jay Carty, six feet, seven inches tall, former professional basketball player and all muscle, was waiting with his wife. To say the least, there was a very awkward beginning. I mumbled an apology and tried to explain that I took the call on my way to a class and failed to write the time in my schedule.

Jay handed me a folder containing his Taylor/Johnson Temperament Test. I could feel him glaring at me as I studied it and realized that he could be very intimidating to most people when he was angry. The test showed an extremely dominant, very hostile, strongly expressive person. I decided to take a highly aggressive approach. After all, he must have some biblical insights since he had been a camp director in a Christian camp and was now considering moving on to serve in another Christian organization.

Here is Jay's version of the meeting:

I had been directing a Christian conference center in the mountains of southern California around Lake Arrowhead. The big problems at the camp had been solved, and I knew I wasn't a fine tuner organizationally. The camp needed a true manager for the next step in its history.

I had two job options, but I couldn't decide between them. I was either going with "Churches Alive," a church disciplining organization, as their Northwest Director, or I was going to be the Team Director for Athletes in Action basketball, a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ.

I kept vacillating. My kids were saying, "What kind of a day is it, Dad, a Churches Alive day or an A.I.A. day?" Sometimes my indecision varied hourly.

I just couldn't make up my mind; it was really tough. So we went to see Dr. Henry Brandt, a nationally acclaimed Christian counselor, now teaching at a Christian college. I needed help, and I hoped he could give it.

San Diego is a three-hour drive from Lake Arrowhead. When Mary and I arrived, Dr. Brandt wasn't there. He had forgotten the meeting and showed up a half hour late. I was a bit upset about waiting after such a long drive.

We took our Taylor/Johnson Temperament Analysis Tests with us. When we went into the office, the good doctor spread out the tests, looked at them, and asked, "What's the problem?"

I said, "I'm having trouble making a job change and thought you could help us sort out the decision making process."

"Well, it's easy for me to see what the problem is, Jay," Henry responded. "There's sin in your life."

After a lengthy pause I offered a rather impatient response, "Henry perhaps you could elaborate just a little bit."

Dr. Brandt spent the next three or four minutes undressing me emotionally. I was sitting there naked in front of him; he could see who I really was, and I knew it. I was upset. Now, you probably wouldn't have known I was mad. My wife knew. Henry knew, because he's a pro.

So, I'm sitting there mad, and Henry asks, "What seems to be bothering you, Jay?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't compound the problem by lying about it. Tell me what's on your mind."

Well he picked the right guy. My Taylor/Johnson scored me 99 percent dominant, 96 percent hostile, strongly expressive, and placed me considerably more subjective than objective. In other words, I'm a walking time bomb. Apart from the Holy Spirit, I'm dangerous.

"You hotshot." I was indignant. "You don't care about me, or you wouldn't have forgotten the appointment. Then you pull this grandstand move by telling me there's sin in my life, pat me on the rear, send me on my way and tell me, 'Hey, you just talked to the great Dr. Henry Brandt.' Well, thank you, but I'm not impressed. I think you're a fraud, and I think you stink."

He disarmed me with a totally emotionless question, "What else seems to be bothering you, Jay?"

There wasn't much fight left in me by this time. It's so hard to fight with someone who won't fight. I said, "Henry, never mind. Just forget about the whole thing." I motioned to Mary for us to leave.

Henry said, "No, no, don't go. Right now, how do you feel down in the pit of your stomach? Would you say the fruit of the Spirit as defined in Galatians 5:22 and 23, typifies the way you feel: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?"

"That answer's easy," I snorted. "None of those qualities typify the way I feel, at least not right now."

He asked, "Then it's safe to conclude you are not filled with the Spirit of God?"

That question means lots of different things to lots of different people. Some people are really asking if you speak in tongues, but that wasn't what Henry was asking. Some people would be asking if you truly know Jesus as Savior. That wasn't what Henry was asking either. He wanted to know if I was currently experiencing the power of God in my life.

I put on my sarcastically theological facade and replied, "Now, Henry, I know Jesus Christ as Savior. My body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's in there. I've been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. I've been baptized into one body, and I drink of the same Spirit you do. But if what you're talking about is the essence of Ephesians 5:18 (being constantly in the process of being filled or empowered by the Holy Spirit), then I'm not filled. Oh, it's true, the Spirit's in here," as I pointed to my body, "but right now He doesn't have all of me. I'm mad, and I've spent some time dwelling on my anger. As I understand it, until he has 100 percent of me, I'm not filled. If that's what you're talking about, then I'm not filled because none of the qualities you just mentioned are currently

evident in my life."

"That's right," he said. "If the qualities aren't there, you can't be filled." He asked again, "You're sure you're not filled?"

"I'm sure," I growled. "Right now I'm not filled, I'm real mad. I mean, I'm really mad at you, and I'm not handling it well. Henry you may not know it, but your upper lip is in danger of being pulled up over your forehead."

Remember, I ran a Christian camp, and in Christian camping you live on the grounds, and everybody with whom you work lives on the grounds. In other words, you live with the same people you work with. You can't get away from each other, except by going into your living quarters. So when you get one or two fellow workers who irritate you, you're irritated most of the time. That was me for sure. . . .

It was then he asked me the blockbuster question. He asked gently, in a soft voice that was such a contrast to mine, "Jay, do you feel that way most of the time?"

It was so quiet you could hear our breathing.

"Yes."

It was true. Anger was an ongoing problem for me. I guess it started early in my life. Anger is often a problem for people who have had an alcoholic parent and who went through their parent's divorce during early teenage years. I had quit a good job, an executive position. We sold a wonderful home in Corona del Mar in the Newport Beach area of southern California, with a view of the sun setting behind Catalina Island every night. We had keys to a private beach. I worked four minutes from my house and actually went home for lunch each day. Talk about having it made! We did, but we flicked it all in to go serve God. Then, four-and-a-half years later, I discovered I'd been serving Him in the power of my flesh, not in the power of the Spirit. You see, I was mad most of the time.

I said, "Henry how bad am I? What am I going to do? I've only spent a lifetime learning to live this way."

"It's like having a splinter in your thumb," Henry responded. "You hurt your thumb a lot because you use it a lot. But if you pull the splinter, the thumb gets well rather quickly."

"Please tell me how."

"Confess it to God."

I was still puzzled. "What are you talking about? How?" I was pleading now.

"Whenever you feel anger, talk to God about it before you sin. You might have to do it twenty times the first day, but it will only require eighteen the second. As you practice, your confession frequency will continue to decrease. You might go a few days or even a week or so without having to do it."¹

Jay Carty was a man who had wrestled most of his life with anger. He experienced a miracle with his anger. I didn't solve his anger problem; God did. Today, he is an easygoing, cheerful, gentle person. What made the difference? He got hold of the simple truth that Jesus died to save us from our sins and make His Spirit available to us. He trained himself to be alert to the first signs of anger, turn at once to God for cleansing, and be empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Today, Jay has an ever-widening speaking ministry in which he teaches people how to yield themselves to God's control.

During my meeting with Jay and his wife, I did not go into his past feelings toward his father or his mother or how his parents' divorce affected him when he was younger. Our discussion lasted twenty to thirty minutes and focused on his sinful behavior of anger. I just directed him to the healing power of God in order to deal with the sin in his life today. God may have later brought issues from his past to his mind that needed attention, but the immediate issue was his current anger. This is the miracle available to everyone: we are a prayer away from peace and freedom from anger.

How fast can someone become angry? Five seconds is not too fast, is it? If I can get angry in less than five seconds, I can get un-angry in the time it takes to breathe a simple prayer. It is just that simple! It has worked in my own life and in thousands of lives over the years.

It *is* also true that I don't understand the complete situation in people's lives. And neither do you or any other counselor! But God does! That's why we bring our anger to Him: He understands us and loves us and wants us to be free from anger.

THE CONSUMING NATURE OF ANGER

Some people relish and enjoy their anger. Frederick Bueckner says it clearly:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. *The skeleton at the feast is you.*²

I have never met anyone, anywhere in the world, who has escaped the destructive force of anger, or who has never experienced someone else's anger as a destructive force.

The one single problem that everyone is plagued with universally is anger.

Some writers say anger is neither good nor bad. It all depends on how you use it. Some writers use the term "righteous indignation" which motivates a person to correct mistreatment and injustices; if this is correct, then people will be angry the rest of their lives because there is always something you can be angry about. Some go so far as to say that anger is God-given.

The Latin root for anger is *angere* which means "to strangle." I find the definition of anger helps clarify the real situation:

ANGER: emotional reaction, of displeasure and/or antagonism—an inner frustration—an impulse to retaliate, punish, seek revenge. Anger can vary in intensity from mild annoyance that is hardly noticeable to extreme overmastering rage resembling insanity. Anger can trigger an outward display ranging from a light change of expression to destruction or murder—from a mild word to enraged screaming.

Personally, I have never experienced anger within my body as a positive force. It has *always* been a hindrance to intelligent straight thinking and constructive rational behavior. And in my work as a counselor and business consultant, I have never observed anger to be a positive factor in problem solving. I have never found anger to be righteous. From the slightest shade of anger that we may not even be conscious of to the anger that leads to murder—it is all cut from the same cloth.

In an instant, anger can change a person from being satisfied, cheerful, and relaxed to being dissatisfied, unhappy, and tense. Oddly enough, this sudden change within the body is triggered by something that happens outside the body. Life would be much more pleasant and comfortable and relaxing if only we could find its cause and cure.

If there is a topic about which there is universal agreement, it would be that unrestrained anger can destroy us. It cannot be ignored. It must be tamed.

But if there is a topic about which there is universal disagreement, it would be how to tame anger.

If there is anger in your heart, someone may either do or not do something that instantly triggers anger inside of you. Someone may say or not say something that immediately triggers your anger. Something happens or fails to happen that triggers your anger. Thoughts about the past, present, or future can trigger your anger. Angry emotions can vary in intensity from mild annoyance that is hardly noticeable to extreme overmastering rage that resembles insanity.

THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF ANGER

Anger produces disagreeable bodily changes that cannot be ignored. Almost everyone is familiar with the following:

- pulse rate increases
- heart beats faster
- blood pressure rises
- the throat tightens
- the mouth is dry
- gooseflesh appears
- hair is erect
- pupils of the eyes open wide
- eyeballs glisten
- person sweats, blushes, turns pale
- muscles tense
- highly alert
- desire for physical action increases
- insomnia may be present
- colon and/or stomach problems appear

Anger can trigger some action ranging from just a slight change of expression to destruction or murder. Anger may result in a mild word or enraged screaming. Anger can, but seldom does, motivate a person to seek changes that will improve the environment that triggers the anger.

To grasp how frustrating anger can be, look at the range of people who can trigger an angry response in you: babies, parents, marriage partners, children, friends, people at work, total strangers, yourself, clerks, neighbors, officials, people in social gatherings.

Circumstances can also trigger anger. The range varies greatly. P.T. Young reports the results of asking a group of college students to keep records of what stimulated them to an angry reaction. Here are the results: unjust accusations, insulting remarks, not invited to a party, disobedience of children, criticisms, contradictions, scoldings, unwelcome advice, work left undone, being locked out, money being lost, sleep interrupted, physical pain, thwarting self-expression.³

Recently, someone even told me that he was angry at the weather. I am sure that you can also add to the above list.

The question is: "Can God help?" The answer is emphatically, "Yes!" His help is decidedly different from human or self-help.

Many people who know very little about Jesus do know that He threw the money changers out of the temple. Others who know very little about the Bible know about another verse:

**Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath.
(Ephesians 4:26, KJV)**

People use these few verses to justify their anger. I take this verse to mean that if you are aware of being angry you should deal with it quickly. The deadline is sundown.

Anger is a normal response to unrighteousness. Are we to conclude then, that our anger is God-given and alerts and energizes us into action to see that wrongs are made right? Assuming that there are people or issues worthy of focusing wrath upon, what or who would they be? As I study the Bible, I do not find that we are instructed to vent our anger against evil causes or toward evil people. Evaluate these verses:

"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you . . . [The Father] makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good." (Matthew 5:44-45, NKJV)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. (Ephesians 5:25, NKJV)

Teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children. (Titus 2:4, KJV)

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39, NKJV)

Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God, for he has said that he will repay those who deserve it. (Romans 12:19, LB)

Love the brotherhood. (1 Peter 2:17, NKJV)

Abound in love . . . for all men. (1 Thessalonians 3:12, NASB)

If we eliminate all of the above people as objects of our anger, who is scripturally left that can be the object of our anger?

The Bible does state that anger is a natural expression of our humanness; it is a natural expression of our "old man" and "the old sin nature." But the Bible says that anger is "sin" and it is not okay.

Look at what the Bible actually says about man's anger:

The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:20, NKJV)

Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret—it only causes harm.

(Psalm 37:8, NKJV)

Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, For anger rests in the bosom of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:9, NKJV)

Make no friendship with an angry man, And with a furious man do not go, Lest you learn his ways And set a snare for your soul. (Proverbs 22:24-25, NKJV)

A quick-tempered man acts foolishly. (Proverbs 14:17, NKJV)

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. (Proverbs 16:32, NKJV)

"Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." (Matthew 5:22, NKJV)

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. (Ephesians 4:31, NKJV)

Put off all these: anger, wrath, malice. (Colossians 3:8, NKJV)

[Lay] aside all malice. (1 Peter 2:1, NKJV)

Anger is a universal fact of life. Law enforcement people report that at least half of the homicides committed in this country involve people who know each other. Millions of women are beaten up each year by their husbands. Millions of children are abused each year by angry parents. At any time it seems that people experience an explosion of varying degrees of intensity of displeasure, antagonism, belligerence, rage, and violent passion.

The difficult problem is how can a human being, who naturally responds angrily to the circumstances of life, change from responding in anger to responding in love? Humanly speaking, we must admit that this biblical advice is impossible to attain. We all know that to bottle up or swallow your anger is no solution. Bottled up anger can ruin your health, twist your thinking, and make you a walking time bomb, set to explode at some external provocation. What can a person do? You can attempt to manage this anger yourself or you can turn to God for help. Humanly speaking, what can you do to tame your anger?

Children are a large group that are victims of anger expression. Some advice was proposed in a newspaper advertisement by the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse. It was entitled *12 Alternatives to Whacking Your Kid*. The ad advised that when big and little problems of your everyday life pile up to the point where you feel like lashing out—stop! Take time out. Don't take it out on your kid. Try any or all of these simple alternatives—whatever works for you. The ad goes on to list twelve:

1. Stop in your tracks. Step back. Sit down.
2. Take five deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale, slowly, slowly.
3. Count to ten. Better yet, twenty. Or say the alphabet out loud.
4. Phone a friend. A relative. Even the weather.
5. Still mad? Punch a pillow. Or munch an apple.
6. Thumb through a magazine, book, newspaper, photo album.
7. Do some sit-ups.
8. Pick up a pencil and write down your thoughts.
9. Take a hot bath. Or a cold shower.
10. Lie down on the floor, or just put your feet up.
11. Put on your favorite record.
12. Water your plants.

I was reading an article on anger management while traveling in an airplane. This is typical advice offered by anger management professionals. The authors proposed four steps:

1. *Cool off before you sound off.* They made suggestions similar to the newspaper ad.
2. *Identify what causes you to feel anger.* How do you take criticism or teasing? Develop an awareness of what triggers your anger.
3. *How can you make anger work for you?* Learn what forms of anger expression are acceptable to your colleagues. Find something constructive that you can do to work off your anger.
4. *Communicate your anger.* Use facts and objective information that others need to know about you. Help them see that your response was appropriate and reasonable. Develop information so you can help each other avoid anger-producing situations.⁴

Is it really true that we must live with angry responses all our lives? Is there no other way to find freedom from anger than in perfecting self-control, resolving human relation problems, and altering the circumstances we get plunged into? Is there no other way than to back off and calm down?

As far as I know, that's all anyone humanly speaking knows to do at this point in history. This is the struggle that the humanist must live with because anger happens so fast you often act before you know it.

The Bible offers a radical solution: "Put it away. Stop it." This is humanly impossible. Yes, it takes a miracle. You need supernatural help.

DEALING WITH ANGER BIBLICALLY

There are two basic steps in dealing with anger from a biblical perspective.

1. Recognize Anger as Sin

God's prescription for dealing with destructive anger is precise and strong. Strife, malice, hatred, anger, outbursts of wrath, dissension, and contention are works of the flesh—of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19-21).

Anger is sin, and that's good news! Because, there is a divine solution for sin. God promised to help you. Dealing with sin is His specialty.

[Jesus] will save His people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21, NKJV)

Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12, NKJV)

A simple step that gives you the strength to "stop" angry responses is to invite Jesus to come into your life. Competent, able people have a hard time accepting the fact that we need supernatural help. "I can manage my anger. Isn't that good enough?" It certainly beats exploding. The best you can do is to manage your anger. Only God can help you to "stop" because *anger is sin*. Therefore, humans need a Savior who will cleanse us of our sins.

It is not inevitable that we must spend the rest of our lives struggling with anger. Anger can be "put away." Once we accept the fact that anger is sin and we need a Savior, we can practice a simple biblical directive daily, if necessary:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9, NKJV)

He will cleanse the anger out of our hearts. Anger is not good. Anger interferes with my thinking process. It is bad. It is destructive. It is sin.

2. Replace Anger with the Fruit of the Spirit

When you have a forgiven, cleansed heart, you can ask God for the power of the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life:

Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23, NKJV)

You will still have problems, face injustices and difficult people just as everyone does. You will still need to be energized, alerted, and motivated to correct what needs correcting. But God knows that a person energized by the Holy Spirit with love, joy,

peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control has the strength to conquer bitterness, sarcastic words, anxiety, bodily tensions, or violent behavior that formerly characterized him.

The apostle Paul says it best:

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16, NKJV)

A Christian does not always surrender to God perfectly, anymore than he can manage himself perfectly. Few people make it through any given day perfectly. But you can catch anger at the earliest possible point. When you realize you have sinned, take it to God.

As the apostle John says,

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation [the one who paid our debt with his life] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2, NKJV)

Lesson: Anger puts my brain on the shelf; God's supernatural miracle puts my anger on the shelf.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
 - Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
 - What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?
1. Considering the range of anger, is mild annoyance different from rage?
 2. Considering the Bible verses quoted in this chapter, at whom can we be legitimately angry?
 3. Dare we call anger sin? All of it?

4. Review the range of people and circumstances that stimulate anger. Are you the focus of someone's anger? Are you angry at someone or something?

¹ Jay Carty, *Counter Attack* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1988), 59-63.

² Frederick Bueckner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), n.p.

³ P. T. Young, *Feelings and Emotions* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 138.

⁴ Marilyn Manning and P. A. Haddock, "Temper Those Tantrums," *Sky*, July, 1989, 100-105.

Permission to Reproduce and Distribute

Publisher grants permission to reproduce and distribute this material without written approval, but only in its entirety and only for non-profit use. No part of this material may be altered or used out of context without publisher's written permission.

©2012 Biblical Counseling Insights

See www.BiblicalCounselingInsights.com for additional life discipleship resources. Download a free Bible or other spiritual growth resources at www.GodResources.org.