

Message: Confessing Anger

Have you ever heard of “Christian bubble wrap”?¹

Chaplain Brian Shields says he’s heard Christians say, “‘God makes no mistakes, so I can’t be angry at God.’ Or patients and families at the hospital where he serves may say, ‘You know, I can’t get angry at God because of this illness, death, health challenge, etc..’ He calls these sayings Christian bubble wrap.

When we say things like that, we’re trying to suppress our natural emotions – like anger, hoping that we won’t hurt God’s feelings.

We do the same thing with people. We withdraw or are silent for fear of making someone else uncomfortable. But a good, healthy relationship can take strong emotional outbursts. In fact, it can grow stronger. Our relationship with God will not only stand up to our anger, it can be made stronger. It doesn’t just happen, though. We have to work to have a healthy emotional state. We have to embrace a loving God.

Some of us were raised believing that if one person gets angry at another, the relationship would fall apart. We may have seen that happen or experienced it. A well-know role in large or blended families is the role of peacemaker. That role is assumed when we try not to express anger or ‘rock the boat,’ thinking that will keep things calm.

In fact, the opposite is often true. Chaplain Brian remembers a time when he and a colleague at work had a disagreement and got angry at each other in a group activity. Yet they chose to remain in relationship. They met to talk about the differences in their views. As a result, they were able to reconcile and become one of the strongest teams.

Anger doesn’t always lead to severed connections. Working through our anger requires a significant shift in our thinking. God gave us emotions to help us understand ourselves and each other better. It’s a normal, human thing to get angry. Rather than burying our painful emotions and pretending they don’t exist, Chaplain Brian encourages us to follow the advice of Henri Nouwen. Let’s ‘be friends with our

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/life-advice/making-peace-with-anger>

emotions – especially anger.’ So don’t dismiss anger or ignore it. Instead, take it to God in prayer.”¹

When was the last time you were angry? Was it in the last half hour? On the way to church? Yesterday or the day before? Sometime this week? Someone may even be angry right now. There are a lot of things that can make us angry. Problems with family, defiant children, marital conflict, alcoholism, problems at work, sexual issues, nervousness or physical disease can make us angry. Our desire to be in control is also a common source of frustration and anger. Anger and hostility have been called the two greatest things to “sabotage our mind.”²

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, said, “I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I’ve been closer to him for that reason.”

Jesus got angry. We know three times when he was. Jesus was angry when the disciples tried to keep children from him (Mark 10:13-15), when the disciples fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), and when he cleared the temple in Jerusalem (Mark 11:15-19). Jesus’ actions made room for the people who were sick and in need to come in for prayer and healing. The words describing Jesus are indignant, distressed and zealous. John says Jesus made a whip of cords to drive the people who were selling cattle and changing money out of the temple (2:15). His followers were reminded of an old prophesy, “*Zeal for God’s house will consume me*” (2:17). Jesus dealt with his just anger in a healthy way. We can learn to as well.

It’s important for us to understand why we get angry. Anger is a human emotion. We all have it. Jesus had it. After all, he was human. By itself, anger is not sinful. Anger is a useful emotion. It can serve a constructive purpose, leading to change. But there’s a difference in the reason why Jesus got angry and the reason why many of us get angry.

God is perfect, omniscient and always completely accurate in what God sees and knows. Divine anger is a reaction to injustice and unrighteousness. God’s wrath works to make things in creation right

² Gary Collins, *Christian Counseling*, W Publishing Group, 1988, p. 120

with God. In contrast, human beings are imperfect. We each see things from our own perspective. We aren't always able to accurately determine the difference between real injustice, as God sees it, and apparent injustice. As a result, we sometimes get angry over issues we think are wrong, which would not be considered wrong if we had all the facts. Our self-interest often causes our perceptions to be distorted. This is particularly true when we feel vulnerable, threatened or criticized. We can misinterpret the actions of others and jump to angry, even unjustified, conclusions. Has anyone ever jumped on someone else only to realize you were wrong? How did you feel?

It's important to realize our perceptions play a part in situations that make us angry. The same words, said by the same person, in two different settings can result in very different responses. For example, trash talking with your friends at school, work or the gym has a very different impact than the same language at home with your parents, children or relatives.

The question we have to ask ourselves is: “What do we do when we get angry?” It makes a big difference. If we go in “guns blazing,” we can stir up trouble, make enemies, ruin chances and even make ourselves sick. If we can learn to properly handle our anger, we can keep situations under control, cement friendships, win respect and stay healthy.³

Norman Wright suggests four basic ways anger influences people. “Anger can be repressed. We hold back and withdraw from situations that are likely to make us angry. Anger can be suppressed. We turn our feelings inward so others can't see them. Anger can be expressed. We act on our feelings by attacking the source of our anger or some substitute. Anger can be confessed. We face it and deal directly with the causes of anger. This way is healthiest, but it's important to note these responses overlap, depending on our perceptions and situation.”⁴ We may have learned unhealthy anger responses. We may need to spend time learning new ones.

³ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/emotional-and-mental-health/tips-to-control-your-anger>

⁴ *Op cit, Collins, p. 126*

Paul gives us a warning, *"Be angry without sinning. Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil"*

(Ephesians 4:26-27). Knowing what makes you angry is key because anger and sin often go together. Children, teens, young, middle-aged and senior adults act out their anger in different ways. For example, we learn passive-aggressive behaviors from the time we're children.

You see these behaviors in all sorts of ways. The talented cook burns a meal. People gossip and spread harmful stories. People "forget" to do what they promised, refuse to cooperate, put people down or make embarrassing comments when others can't respond. Another example is "accidentally" leaving someone else's property where it can be damaged or stolen. More serious behaviors include drinking, failing in school, road rage or extramarital affairs. There are many subtle ways we attack or "get even" with parents, classmates, a significant other or some other person who has made us angry. These indirect forms of aggression can be as harmful as direct violence.

Another common problem is redirected aggression. We see it in different ways. The person who is angry at their boss stifles their anger at work, but takes it out on their spouse or children at home because it's a "safe place" to ventilate their anger, even though their family had nothing to do with it. Redirecting our anger to parents or other family members, rather than addressing it directly is common. Redirecting our anger at elected officials toward local business owners or another innocent, but accessible, person is another way aggression is acted out.

Jesus didn't teach the way of eye-for-an-eye, a tooth-for-a-tooth, whatever it takes to get-even (see Matthew 5:38-44). Jesus said, *"love your enemies and pray for those who harass you"* (5:44). I don't know about you, but that takes a lot of work. And not just in the spur of the moment. I'm talking about weeks, months or years of prayer and practice to help us find healthy responses in those moments when someone or something pushes our button – HARD!

A warning: one of the greatest myths about anger is that we need to "get it out of our system" by letting off steam. That means shouting, swearing, pounding on pillows or in some way venting our hostility.

This is never suggested in Scripture and there is evidence showing that expressions of rage and hostility actually serve to *increase* our anger.⁵

What can we do? The first, most important thing we can do is admit the truth. When we're angry, we need to admit it. We need to learn what makes us angry. We need to understand how we were raised and how our experience shapes us in our emotional responses. Denying we get angry or that we might get angry is unhealthy. We can change. We don't have to be locked into a cycle of anger like Esau, Jacob and their parents, who played favorites (Genesis 27:41-45). Second, we need to deal with the things that make us angry as they come, one at a time. Don't let the pressure building up. Remember, we all do wrong. We all get angry. We all need forgiveness.

Christian psychologist Archibald Hart says, “Blowing up at someone you love doesn't help much. But talking about your anger does help. Telling someone you care about that he or she has made you angry allows room for reconciliation.”⁵ We may need a moment before we can do this, so take the time. Counting is good. Giving yourself a time out is another good option. When you do talk, recognize the other person has feelings, too. That will allow you to try to understand what's happening. Listen and accept any apology and try to be forgiving. This can help if we have a tendency to “shoot first” and talk later.

Karen Thornton of Eureka, CA offers words of wisdom, “Among my most prized possessions are words I have not spoken in anger.”⁶

We want to help. You received five prayers to say when you're angry (*see handout*). Chaplain Brian Shields offers these prayers for times when we're angry with a loved one, disappointed with a family member, grieving and angry and when our hope is dashed. For example, anger when a job opportunity is lost. Put them up in a place where you can see them. Give it a try. You'll get better, step by step.

If you think “I've got this,” then here's a REAL calling for you. Live the way Peter taught, “*Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for*

⁵ *Op. Cit., Collins, p. 128*

⁶ <https://www.guidепosts.org/inspirational-quotes/39597>

abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It's for this that you were called - that you might inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9). We're a church of blessings. Let's be a church where we can be real in our anger – quick to listen, slow to speak and unrelenting in our forgiveness.

Doing so is a blessing to us and to our neighbors.

Let us pray...

O God, Hear us, we pray.

Hear us when we feel frustrated and angry

Hear us when we feel threatened, vulnerable and afraid

Hear us when we feel the need to strike out or to get even with others

Hear us when we're overwhelmed by injustice

Help us to build deeper relationship with Jesus

Help us to have the confidence to admit we're angry

Help us to make the effort to know what makes us angry

Help us to take time when we're angry, instead of blowing up

Help us to realize you have a bigger picture that we can rely on

Help us to find a small group so we can grow as a whole person.

Fill us with your Spirit, the spirit of love and power. Show us how to pray and how to live by faith. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Genesis 27:41-45 (NRSV)

Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away - until your brother’s anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?”

Ephesians 4:25-32 (NRSV)

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Matthew 21:11-14 (The Message)

The parade crowd answered, “This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Jesus went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He quoted this text: My house was designated a house of prayer; You have made it a hangout for thieves.

Now there was room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them.