

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Slow to Anger

James 1:20

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Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19–20).

One of my favorite animated movies is *Inside Out*. In second place would be *Bolt*, but that's for another day. I love kid's movies with clever humor and a compelling message. I was captivated by *Inside Out* because I found myself laughing, wiping away a tear or two, and also pondering the significance of what I was watching.

In case you need a refresher on *Inside Out*, it's the story of an eleven-year-old girl named Riley as she experiences the emotional challenges of moving from Minnesota to San Francisco. The movie tracks the internal story of Riley's emotions and how they relate to each other. There are four key emotions which are personified as characters: Joy, Sadness, Fear, and Anger.

While Joy is the dominant character, Anger also plays a prominent role. His white shirt, tie, and dress slacks make him look professional but precarious, because when he's true to form, fire shoots from his bright red, square head. In one early scene, Riley refuses to eat broccoli, and her dad threatens to not give her dessert. Anger, who is reading the *Mind Reader* newspaper is furious. "So that's how you want to play it?" he says and then pushes Riley into a temper tantrum.

The character Anger is always present but behind the scenes until something unfair happens. He's the great protector, the emotion defender, but he can also be reckless and dangerous.

You're familiar with him, aren't you? Part of what makes *Inside Out* such a brilliant film is the way it portrays what is happening inside of us. And when it comes to anger, the movie shows us how irrational, ridiculous, and destructive it can be.

While the film *Inside Out* is entertaining and thought-provoking, we also need to remember that anger—in the real world—is exceptionally dangerous. We might laugh at the characterization, but we should be careful to remember its evil effects.

Last week we examined the importance of being quick to hear and slow to speak. Today, we are going to take a look at what the Bible says about anger.

In the same way that pressure, hardship, or persecution can create an opportunity for sinful communication, they can also create an opportunity for sinful anger. So, let's look at (1) What is anger?, (2) When is anger sinful?, and (3) How do we defeat anger?

1. What Is Anger?

Our text says, "...slow to speak, slow to anger." Take note that James doesn't say, "Don't be angry." That's important because when you hear the word "anger," you generally assume that it's wrong. But we don't do that necessarily with speaking. We know that there is good speaking and bad speaking.

The same is true for anger. There's good anger and bad anger. So, what is it? Let's start with a general definition and then see how it's used in James and other places in the Bible.

Anger is linked to unfairness. Anger is connected to love and a sense of concern. In other words, what we love affects what makes us angry. Show me what makes you angry, and somewhere underneath is love—for good and bad.

Anger says, "That is wrong." It is a fundamentally moral emotion. In fact, you could say it is the moral emotion. When you are angry, what is happening inside is this: your heart is observing the scene before you and crying out that something you love is being treated unjustly.¹

In James 1:19, the word is "ougre." It can be translated as anger, wrath, fury, or punishment—both positively and negatively. A few examples:

- *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18).*
- *From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty (Rev. 19:15).*

Throughout the Bible, we frequently see that God gets angry. But the reason is because he's full of love. God's love for what is right creates righteous anger. That's why we see Jesus getting angry. According to Mark 3:5, Jesus looked at the Pharisees with anger "being grieved at the hardening of their hearts" when they were judging him for healing on the Sabbath.

Therefore, you can think of anger as the emotion that confronts what is wrong. It's a zeal to do what's right because something's not right.

In this respect, anger can be good and righteous—even commanded. For example:

¹ Alasdair Groves and Winston Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2019), 158 Kindle edition.

- *Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil (Eph. 4:26–27).*

Alasdair Groves writes, “Anger seeks justice. Specifically, it protects what it loves, punishes any who harm its beloved, and seeks to reverse the damage.”²

Sometimes to not be angry is to be sinful. Some of you not only know the trauma of sinful actions, you know the pain of sinful inaction. Some of you know what it’s like to not have people you love, or the people who you thought loved you, stand up for you. Maybe you were the victim of abuse and people knew what was going on, but no one got angry. No one did anything.

This can also relate to our emotional indifference. For example, the killing of innocent children through abortion can become so culturally familiar that we’ve lost the shock or anger. We should be angry. But we’re not. Or when it comes to racial and ethnic issues, there’s a temptation for some of us to marginalize the conversation instead of saying, “Man, that’s not right.” Anger causes us to act in the cause of what’s right. It’s the emotion of action when something is wrong.

Now, I know for some of you that raises another question—a good one. What if you are not sure something’s wrong but someone else is convinced it is? This is especially challenging with racial incidents. One group cries injustice while another isn’t sure because not everything’s clear yet. This is where I think empathy, sympathy, and lament can help. Lament grieves over a broken world while waiting for everything to be known. Lament is better than indifference.

Anger is complicated, isn’t it? The challenge with anger is not merely its presence. Being angry isn’t automatically sinful. The issue is both why we’re angry and what we do about it. Let’s look at that now.

1) When is anger sinful?

Now that we’ve established what anger is, we now need to turn to when it becomes sinful.

First, since James commands being “slow to anger” we should know that anger which is rash, out of control, and “quick” is sinful. James particularly has words in mind, given the context. He knows what you know: there’s a direct link between our sinful anger and our sinful words.

God himself is like this. When Moses desired to see the glory of God, he was only allowed to see the backside of God. And as the Lord passed before him, God proclaimed:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the

² Alasdair Groves and Winston Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2019), 162 Kindle edition.

guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation (Ex. 34:6–7).

Aren't you glad God is slow to anger? Imagine if God handled your anger like you handle yours?

The Bible is full of warnings about being quick-tempered, especially with our words:

- ¹ A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1).
- ⁹ Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools (Eccles. 7:9).
- ²⁷ Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding(Prov. 17:27).

But it isn't just loud words or actions. There's another kind of anger that hides behind "kindness and sweetness."

- *His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords (Psalm 55:21).*
- *Do not drag me off with the wicked, with the workers of evil, who speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts (Psalm 28:3).*
- *They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse (Psalm 62:4).*

This is the kind of quick anger known as bitterness, an internal resentment toward someone. Sometimes this results in giving others the "silent treatment." At other times, it comes out as passive-aggressive behavior. It could look like: withholding affirmation, not following through, using words that minimize, using a sarcastic tone, responding as if you are constantly misunderstood.

Those are the expressions—active and passive anger. Can you think of situations in the last week, either in person or online, where something "tripped your breaker"? Can you think of a moment when you were rash with your words, in a text, email, or something you posted online?

Unfortunately, our present media climate doesn't help. It serves to amplify and monetize our tendency toward anger. I used to think that the internet was sexually dangerous. It still is. But, it's emotionally dangerous too—especially during this pandemic.

Chris Martin, a marketing editor at Moody, writes:

Like fish cannot escape water and live on dry land, the social internet is so woven into our modern world that escaping it and existing outside the social internet is virtually impossible... Honestly, the best we can do is recognize that the water in which we swim is toxic. The water is very much not fine. Our job is to do what we can to clean up the water and not add to its toxicity. Recognize that Facebook serves you content with the intent to cause you to engage. That political post you received in your feed? Facebook knows it will fire you up and lead you to

*comment. Resist that urge. That sensual picture that appears in your Instagram explore tab is served to you because Instagram knows you will look at it. Be a smart fish: resist the bait.*³

Just be aware, especially in a ramp-up to the election, that people are trying to make you mad. Be slow to anger.

However, there's something more in this text. Verse 20 tells us something helpful after the word "for." That word is usually a marker for an explanation or justification of what has just been said. Here's what James says, "...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

Interestingly, James uses the word "produce." Anger desires to "do" or "accomplish something." When it's righteous anger, it desires justice. When it's sinful anger, it desires self-justification. Sinful anger is our attempt to control whatever it is that we want.

Just think of the last time you got sinfully angry in a conversation. If you replay the situation, I think you'll find that, at some point, a mere exchange of words wasn't working. Or, the other person started to get "heated" and you felt like you might lose. At that moment you wanted something, and you were willing to use anger to get what you wanted or loved.

In that situation, you were acting as if you knew, with certainty, what was right. You were acting as if you were God. James is saying that God has a goal of righteousness—that is what he wants. And human anger doesn't lead to that goal. Let me state it very clearly: My sinful anger is incompatible with God's goals for my life. Therefore, it seems to me, that every time sinful anger is in play, the real issue is whether God is going to control my life or if I'm going to control my life.

Sinful anger, therefore, is an agenda-battle. Lurking underneath anger is a struggle between God's plan and his ways and my plan and my ways. Anger tends to surface when my agenda collides with God's agenda. Since I don't have the ultimate power to control things, I use anger as a means of getting what I want. Anger is a subversive attempt to take God's place.

It might look like passive-aggressive behavior, non-verbal cues, the words you say, verbal abuse, and even physical abuse. All of them are expressions of anger in an attempt to get what we want. Lurking underneath our anger is pride, self-pity, control, and greed.

Anger is dangerous. But do you know what's worse? Listening to this message for someone else who has an anger problem. Some of the angriest people in the world don't see themselves as angry. They justify their anger. They disguise it with tears or silence or their pain.

So, if you have any sense of conviction or awareness of your anger, thank God for his grace. And, then, work to cut anger off at the root.

2) How do we defeat anger?

³ <https://lovethynerd.com/the-social-dilemma-exposes-the-siren-call-of-social-media/>

Do you remember being told in elementary school what to do in case your clothes ever caught on fire? “Stop, drop, and roll!” was the strategy. The child is to stop so that the flames will not be fed more oxygen and so others can help. The simple command can help by cutting through the fear, panic, and irrationality that would come if a child found themselves on fire.

This is what the first chapter of James can do for us amid the powerful emotions of anger. Part of the problem with anger is that our emotions are so strong, we can be completely irrational—doing and saying things that we will regret later. We can gain great victory by simply recognizing that not everything we feel is true, and by remembering that anger is an agenda-conflict with God.

So, let me give you a simple way to remember this. When you are angry:

- **Stop** – Whatever you are doing because you are angry, stop immediately. Don’t say what you are thinking, don’t write the email, and don’t take physical action. Stop.
- **Think** – Consider your heart, ask yourself what is bothering you, and what does the Bible say about your feelings.
- **Seek** – Turn to God in prayer, telling him your complaint, pouring out your heart to him, and asking for his help.

We’re called to remember that the Bible says:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:23).

Anger is incompatible with the gospel. It invalidates the gospel. By our actions, it gives evidence that the gospel does not work. Why is that?

The gospel message—that Jesus came into the world to save sinners—proclaims that God has a plan for the universe and that his plan involves saving undeserving people. The gospel tells us that human beings are natural-born sinners and that we deserve nothing but judgment. The gospel shatters our understanding of “fairness” since grace through Christ is fundamentally unfair. And the gospel shapes everything that we see in life—including being treated unfairly—as part of God’s loving plan to form Christ in us.

So, when something tempts me to be sinfully angry, I need to stop, think, and seek God’s help. I need to ask God to remind me of important truths that are rooted in the gospel. I need to remind myself of the following truths:

- Only God is good enough to be angry
- I deserve nothing but judgment
- In Christ, I have been treated far better than I’ll ever deserve

- I am called to be just like Jesus
- God will settle all injustice
- And one day he will

So, when anger comes knocking at your door (or maybe pounding!), preach the gospel to your loud-mouthed emotions. Whatever you want to do—don't! Stop. Think carefully about your heart and what is going on in your soul. And seek God's help to do what is right. Stop. Think. Seek.

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