

ANGER PRODIGAL MESSAGE #8

Memory verse of the week:

James 1:19–20 ESV: “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.”

One of the Prodigal leaders related the following story:

When my daughter was about five years old, she did something that upset me. Rather than be the good father that God wanted me to be, I responded in anger. My countenance clearly expressed my anger as my daughter got a terrified look on her face and said, “Daddy, you have a very mad face!” Unrelentingly, I lit into her about whatever tiny infraction she had committed.

That single event haunted me for years. Looking back at that moment feels like swallowing poison.

Unfortunately, I countlessly repeated my sin of anger until March 2016, when my daughter, by then age 26, said that for her own mental health she could no longer have any contact with me until further notice.

I was devastated.

At the time of this writing, my daughter is now 28. Even after three times through the re:generation recovery program at Watermark Community Church, I never linked my sin back to the need to make amends with my daughter—until a few weeks ago.

I called her and reminded her of the event that I just described. She had forgotten this particular encounter, but she remembered many, many others. I was able to tell her about my regret and sorrow regarding so many years of my verbal abuse and my failure to be the kind of father that I wanted to be—that my daughter needed me to be. I asked for her forgiveness and she granted it.

Even though my daughter and I reconciled last year, there are still deep wounds resulting from my anger that require continual attention and healing.

Introduction

Christian counselors report that 50% of their clients deal with anger issues.¹ Anger can be devastating to everyone it touches. Uncontrolled human anger leads to shattered relationships, damaged or non-existent communication, the elimination of joy, and diminished physical and emotional health and well-being. In this message, we will explore whether anger is always a sin and how we can control and overcome our anger. We at Prodigal hope to successfully demonstrate the value of becoming “unoffendable” and show how such a paradigm can glorify God in marvelous and powerful ways. *Love* is the key to transforming a resistant or rebellious heart, and *Jesus* is the key to love. Now, while we will explore how to love one’s prodigal well in subsequent messages, it must be stated presently that anger is *never* the answer to dealing with prodigal chaos, as it is a counterproductive motivational tool that only creates more chaos.

¹ “What does the Bible say about anger?” Got Questions Ministries, <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-anger.html>.

Is anger always a sin?

There is a distinct difference between *sinful* anger and *righteous* anger. If one studies anger in the Bible, then one will readily see that both God and Christ got angry. Therefore, since God is perfect (Psalm 92:15) and Jesus Christ is without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15), anger must not, in and of itself, be sin. Anger is simply an emotion of displeasure—sometimes extreme displeasure. Anger can be helpful as an emotion to warn of injustice or to point out that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with. Much can be learned about “righteous anger” from the following Scriptures:

- Genesis 6:5–6: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”
- Numbers 11:1: “And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.”
- Mark 3:5: “And [Jesus] looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...”
- Mark 11:16–17: “And [Jesus] entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.’”

From these examples, as well as many more, we can see that righteous anger is directed at sin and injustice. In fact, such anger is the appropriate response to sin and injustice. A key point to remember, however, is that **we are not God!** Only the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—in their perfection, holiness, and divinity—can handle anger appropriately.

Righteous anger is difficult for fallen humanity to achieve, as our sinful pride and selfishness get in the way. We often allow our anger to turn into sin and we direct it against the people who hurt, offend, or annoy us. Therefore, our anger should not be harbored for long; instead, it should be identified and released quickly.

- Psalm 4:4: “Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.”
- Ecclesiastes 7:9 NIV: “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.”
- Ephesians 4:26, 31: “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”

In his book, *Uprooting Anger: Biblical Help for a Common Problem*, Robert Jones points out **three criteria of righteous anger**:

1. *Righteous anger reacts against actual sin.* It arises from an accurate perception of true evil.

2. *Righteous anger focuses on God and His Kingdom, rights, and concerns, and not on me and my kingdom, rights, and concerns.* It focuses on how people offend God and His name, not me and my name.
3. *Righteous anger is accompanied by other godly qualities and expresses itself in godly ways.* It remains self-controlled; it doesn't spiral downward in self-pity or despair; and it doesn't ignore, snub, or withdraw from people.²

Another author, Brant Hansen, makes some powerful points in his book, *Unoffendable*: "Choosing not to take offense is not about simply ignoring wrongs. If someone, say, cuts in front of you in line, you can address the situation. You don't have to simply accept it. But you can act without contempt, anger, and bitterness."³ How can we do this? Hansen explains that no matter what anyone else has done to us, we stand just as guilty in God's eyes."

Hansen goes on to state something humorous but (sadly) true: When we justify our anger by stating that we are simply being angry at sin, it usually means being angry about *someone else's* sin! As fallen humans, we are prone to believe that someone else is worse than us; we believe everyone is an idiot, except us!

This point is worth taking a closer look at. So, we will focus on the same biblical passage that Hansen does in his book: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. **It is the Lord who judges me.** Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God" (1 Corinthians 4:3–5).

In this passage, the apostle Paul is stating that he was incapable of judging even himself, much less others. In short, God knows private matters; we don't. God knows our private motives; we don't. We think we can judge the motives of others; we're wrong. So, when it comes to anger, while we have the capacity for righteous anger, we must realize how prone we are to sinful anger and sinful expressions of that anger.

Human, sinful anger

As fallen human beings, we often seek to justify our anger, but we must be careful since we tend to manifest our anger sinfully and to direct our anger at people who hurt us, rather than direct our anger (righteously) at the sin itself. And the Bible is quick to point out our tendency to self-deception (see, for example, Jeremiah 17:9). Thus, we shall look at God's Word in order to discern more about sinful anger.

How can we recognize sinful anger?

There are several ways that we can recognize sinful anger:

- Sinful anger manifests when we want something that we feel like we deserve but don't get, such as material possessions or even just respect.

² Robert D. Jones, *Uprooting Anger: Biblical Help for a Common Problem* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 27–44.

³ Brant Hansen, *Unoffendable: How Just One Change Can Make All of Life Better* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2015), 9–10.

- James 4:1–3: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”
- If sinful anger is allowed to linger, it leads to escalation and bitterness.
 - Ephesians 4:26: “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”
- Sinful anger attacks the person, not the sin.
 - Matthew 5:22: “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; ... and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”
- Sinful anger involves poisonous speech.
 - James 3:6–8: “And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ... but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”
- Sinful anger boils over without restraint.
 - Proverbs 29:11: “A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.”
- Sinful anger does not glorify God.
 - 1 Corinthians 10:31: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

What are the causes of sinful anger?

“What do I want, that I am not receiving, that is causing me such anger?”

If we can answer this question honestly and process it in community, then we might see not only the root cause of our anger but also the root cause of the recurring sin(s) in our lives. *Sinful anger has its roots in our own selfish pride, coupled with a lack of trust in, and knowledge of, God.* Once again, therefore, we see that our view of God is critical. And though these truths may sting, they sharpen, grow, and mature us—if we let them!

We are often angry at people because they have shattered our dreams, expectations, or personal significance. We get angry when people embarrass us or cause us pain or distress. We fear that other people’s actions may cause us to lose our money, reputation, relationships, or even life itself, and so we respond with anger. We can all relate to some of these causes of anger. It might be helpful, therefore, to review such potential causes anytime that you are angry in order to determine the source of your anger—it’s a humbling but helpful exercise.

In all such instances of anger, however, we are not taking God at His word. God says in Nahum 1:7 that He is good, that He is a stronghold in the day of trouble, and that He knows those who take refuge in Him. In Matthew 11:28–30, Jesus urges all those who labor and are heavy laden to come to Him so that He may give them rest. And in Proverbs 21:31, God reminds us that though we should be diligent and faithful, the final outcome of any and all circumstances are under His sovereign control alone.

If we do not trust God with the final outcome of our current situation as well as our eternity, then we place ourselves in charge; but, that weight, that responsibility, is enormous, if not impossible! When we assume responsibility for the final outcomes of our circumstances, we try to enforce justice as *we* see fit. We then try to control every situation and rescue our prodigals. Such actions, however, will eventually result in frustration and the very anger that we are trying to avoid—and such anger interferes with the righteousness that God desires of us (James 1:19–20).

Anger's ill effects: Our tongue

As previously stated, anger can be useful if identified as an emotion that warns us of sin or trouble that must be addressed. If we deal with the trouble biblically, without expressions of sinful anger, then God will be glorified. However, if sinful anger continues to rest in our lap, so to speak, then it usually manifests through our *tongues*. Our parents taught us this popular childhood adage: “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” While this perspective *should* be the case for those who are secure in their identity in Christ, oftentimes it is the farthest thing from reality. Words *do* hurt—terribly so—and they are immensely important to God. Thus, the Scriptures point out the importance of the tongue and controlling it:

- Psalm 39:3: “My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.”
- Proverbs 10:19: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains lips is prudent.”
- Matthew 12:34–36: Jesus speaking to the Pharisees, “How can you speak good, when you are evil? **For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.** The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment **people will give account for every careless word they speak.**”
- James 1:26: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”
- See also Proverbs 17:27; James 3:5–10.

Why do we use our tongue in anger?

Anger can become such an instinctive response that we don’t even realize why we are doing it. What purpose are we trying to accomplish by verbally lashing out in anger? We often want to regain control and restore order, respect, or some other value that we believe has been infringed upon. We are threatened and want to gain some sense of security. We feel minimized and want to obtain the significance or love that we so desperately desire and need. In our sin, we may simply want to inflict upon others the pain that has been inflicted upon us.

So, it is helpful to stop and analyze outbursts of anger to determine their purpose. If a particular expression of anger does not align with your Personal Mission Statement (PMS) and the biblical ideals of righteous anger outlined above, then it is likely counter-productive, damaging, and not God-honoring.

What does sinful anger do?

In our anger, we often say things in cruel, unloving ways. We even say things that we don’t really mean; but, in our anger, we seek to hurt those who have hurt us. Even if

we do speak truth, our anger often relays such truth in reckless and hurtful ways (contrary to Ephesians 4:15). Such expressions of anger stop or severely damage healthy communication, which then leads to broken relationships and isolation. And such isolation is right where Satan wants us—where he can whisper in our ears lies that falsely justify our actions. Prodigal progress and reconciliation cannot occur when communication is damaged or non-existent.

God’s instruction on healthy communication

Once a discussion escalates to expressions of sinful anger, healthy listening typically ceases. And so, James 1:19–20 encourages us to emphasize listening over rashly speaking and to guard against sinful anger diligently since no good comes from it. Proverbs 29:22 points out that a wrathful person stirs up strife and commits many sins. And Proverbs 29:20 says that there is more hope for a fool than for one who speaks without thinking—and rash speech is certainly more likely to occur when one is angry and driven by emotion.

Fortunately, God not only tells us what to avoid in our speech but also gives us direction on how to communicate in a healthy manner. Ephesians 4:29 states, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” 2 Timothy 2:25 and 1 Peter 3:15 encourage us to speak with **gentleness** and **respect** when communicating truth. And 2 Timothy 4:2 says, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete **patience** and teaching.”

As we can see, spoken words are extremely important to God and every person will be accountable to Him for their speech—whether building up or tearing down. These realities should give us great pause and motivate us to control both our anger and our tongues.

How can we overcome anger?

Anger is simply one sin among many. We overcome sin only through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:1–14; Ephesians 2:1–7), and we battle sin only through a proper view of God (Romans 12:1–2; Philippians 4:8–9; Galatians 5:16–26). It is no different with anger. We must see ourselves as the wretched sinners that we are—we are just as guilty in our expressions of sinful anger as the people who provoke us to such anger. We must further realize that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16–17; Romans 4:23–5:2; Ephesians 2:8).

The proper perspective of our identity in Christ directs our Personal Mission Statement. And a biblically based PMS should direct us to glorify Him in all that we think, say, and do. If we allow our PMS to guide us, then our God-honoring perspective will produce love and forgiveness rather than anger and strife.

Only God can judge rightly and only God can perfectly handle anger. Furthermore, Christ’s call is for us to take up our cross daily and to follow Him (Luke 9:23–24), which means dying to self—that is, pride, fear, guilt, idols, etc.—and living for Him alone. Look, again, at this reminder from Scripture: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31–32).

So, take your anger to Jesus. Take your anger and process it in the context of a proper understanding of God—His character, promises, and works. And just like the Apostle Paul, “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5)—that includes your anger. And we propose that your anger will be impossible to sustain if taken humbly to Christ. Matthew Henry provides wise words concerning this passage: “‘If you have a just occasion to be angry at any time, see that it be without sin; and therefore take heed of excess in your anger.’ If we would be angry and not sin (says one), we must be angry at nothing but sin; and we should be more jealous for the glory of God than for any interest or reputation of our own.”⁴

Can we have “righteous” prodigal anger?

Of course we can have righteous anger over our prodigal situation, just as Henry eloquently describes above. But, we must realize that our prodigal’s battle is against *sin*, not us. We must also realize that *our* battle is not “against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Therefore, we can be angry at sin, Satan, and satanic forces rather than our prodigals.

Once we know the true enemy, then we can realize that victory is achieved more by the study of God’s Word and prayer than by any other action that we could carry out (Ephesians 6:17–18). Consequently, we will also realize that loving our prodigals involves setting proper boundaries, enforcing appropriate consequences, releasing control to God, and trusting Him with the results. Then, we can love our prodigals well and finally let go of the anger that threatens to destroys us and our relationships. **In the broadest sense, it is love that will bring our prodigal “home”—not anger.**

Conclusion

In the Prodigal Ministry, we constantly urge you to “lay your Isaac down,” in reference to the beautiful and powerful story told in Genesis 22. This concept simply means to *let go of your own need for control and trust God with the outcome of your prodigal chaos*. Just as God has lovingly guided and shaped you more than any human possibly could, so also must you trust God to do the same for your prodigal. This concept is the most difficult obstacle that you must overcome in your prodigal journey, but without doing so, you will never find the peace and joy that God desires for you. We also believe that “laying your Isaac down” is a critical step to aid *your prodigal* in their recovery, as difficult as that may be to comprehend in the beginning. And the reason we discuss the importance of giving God control of our prodigal is that we typically have to release our anger before this is possible.

So, the initial step is to understand the importance of the concept itself—that is, “laying your Isaac down.” Once you realize and accept this, the next step is to believe and verbalize that you have let go of your control over your prodigal situation. For most of us, however, it takes several attempts before we truly and fully release our anger and our need for control. This was certainly the case in my journey.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vols. 6-7, *First Corinthians–Second Timothy*, originally published 1706-1721, edited by Anthony Uyl (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted Publishing, 2018), 176.

*I vividly remember exactly where I was when I read these words from Frederick Buechner: “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 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**.”⁵*

For you, it may be something else that turns the light bulb on and allows you to finally let go and trust God with your prodigal. For me, however, this was that “light bulb” moment. Up until that moment, I had never identified or fully acknowledged it; but, when I read this passage, I suddenly realized just how angry of a person I was. I was angry for the hopes and dreams of mine that had been shattered because of my prodigal chaos. I was angry that my prodigal—my son—was negatively impacting my time, my happiness, and my energy. I realized then my all-consuming preoccupation with him and my attempts to control him.

*I saw my skeleton on the table. And I realized that those bones of a man could not lead himself or his family well, nor could he glorify God amidst the chaos. The anger that I had been denying all along was not helping to improve my prodigal’s journey at all; he was simply doing what he wanted to do, and my anger was doing nothing but harming and disabling me, my family, and my prodigal’s progress! The only thing I could do was let go of control and love my prodigal for the sinner that he—like me—was. So, in that moment, I gave him fully to God. And when I did, I experienced an almost tangible weight lifting off of my shoulders. It was a real, transformational, and supernatural moment, as if God had opened my eyes to the truth. **And I never parented the same again.** I was finally able to set boundaries and enforce consequences because I trusted God with the outcome. I wasn’t angry anymore.*

And so, I choose to be “unoffendable” and not take my son’s rebellion personally, but, instead, rest in my identity as a totally forgiven and beloved child of the King. I constantly remind myself that love, kindness, and forgiveness are more powerful motivators and have won more hearts than anger, fear, and revenge.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 2.

CLOSED GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Day 1

Remember the most recent or the most notable moment of anger that you have experienced. In seeking to articulate the true cause of your anger to yourself and the group, what was it that the other party was depriving you of that you wanted so badly?

Day 2

If we have no idols, then it is hard to be upset when something is taken away. What are your most treasured possessions that provoke you to anger when they are threatened (for example, time, money, a relationship)? Be specific.

Day 3

Based on Robert Jones' criteria of righteous anger, have you ever had truly righteous anger? If so, please share with the group.

Day 4

Describe the harmful effects of anger.

Day 5

Has anger impacted any of your relationships? If so, how did you deal with it? If not, how do you need to deal with it to achieve reconciliation as God desires?

Day 6

After reading this week's message on anger, describe your plan to take your anger and remove it from your "lap" quickly so that it does not lead to sin.

NOTES