

Participating in God's righteous anger

Is our outrage only creating a sense of justice for ourselves?

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In Sunday's epistle lesson from [James 1](#), we get a piece of advice that could easily get missed on a busy Sunday: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." That's a powerful observation. Our anger does not produce God's righteousness, so we can afford to be slow to anger. It's an attitude of faith.

Anger is fashionable. We are collectively outraged in important ways at important times. We are angry when another mass shooting takes place. We are furious when a parent inadvertently leaves a sleeping child in a hot car. We are outraged when a dog-fighting ring is exposed. Anger is not a sin. God gets angry—or at least God's people understand that God gets angry as a way of expressing the good and right disconnect between the One who is all-holy, all-loving, all-caring and the events and people that fill us with rage. How we get angry and how we express that anger,

however, makes the difference between participating in God's righteousness and attempting to manufacture our own.

A few weeks ago, I was in the airport and wanted to walk up a long escalator instead of riding along as if on a carnival ride. In most countries, people who ride stand on the right and people who walk pass by on the left. Perhaps you've noticed that we don't adhere to that standard in this country. Anyway, I motioned as if to pass, and a very nice couple ahead of me said, "Oh, would you like to pass? Here, we'll move over!" I thanked them in the sweetest, gentlest, most-appreciative way and proceeded up the escalator. Another person graciously moved aside, and, again, I offered sincere thanks. Then, I came to another man whose bag was in the way. I paused for a minute without saying anything. He looked over his shoulder, saw me, and turned back to face the front. "Excuse me, sir," I said quietly. "May I please get past?" He turned around and said, "You'll get to the top in a minute. You can wait." I was furious. I asked again, more emphatically, if I could pass, and, again, he refused. So I used my foot to slide his bag out of my way, walked past him, and then turned around and said, "You know, I just wanted a few inches to get past you. You didn't have to be a jerk about it!"

In an instant, all my goodwill, all my care, all my politeness evaporated. Everyone with whom I had enjoyed a pleasant exchange up the elevator saw that just beneath the surface I was as volatile as any other angry traveler. The really sad and disappointing thing was that I held onto that anger for hours until slowly it burned away into a general feeling of resentment. And why? Sure, he was a jerk. Sure, there was no external explanation for why he had refused my polite request to pass. I was right, but my anger didn't make it so. All my anger did was confuse the "right" of the situation with the self-importance, self-involvement, self-seeking that lives within me and that showed itself in that moment. There are dozens of ways that I could have handled that differently—ways that would not have denied the wrong, ways that would have insisted on the right, ways that would have invited the man to consider his refusal instead of giving him a story to tell about another angry traveler.

Anger is not wrong, but how we get angry and how we express our anger often is. Asking and answering his own question, my boss used to say, "Never spank your children when you're angry...but when else would you want to spank them? Exactly." James reminds us how to keep it in perspective. Be slow to anger. Most simply, that means letting time pass, letting the moment go, before offering an angry response. But I don't think it always has a temporal dimension. One doesn't

need to wait a few days after a violent attack to be justifiable angry at the situation, but slow anger can also mean calculated, careful, deliberate anger—anger at the legislative process, anger at the culture we inhabit, anger at our collective refusal to do anything besides get angry.

Our anger does not produce God's righteousness. God is righteous. Our anger must be a desire to participate in that righteousness. God gets angry. Jesus gets angry. We get angry, too, but is our anger a product of our faithfulness or an attempt to manufacture our own sense of justice?

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