

Righteous anger (Ephesians 4:25-5:2)

What does it look like to be angry without sinning?

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August 9, 2024

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I have always found “Be angry but do not sin” to be one of the most confounding passages in all of scripture. The obvious implication of the instruction is that it’s possible to be angry without any sin, and the perhaps-less-obvious implication is that anger can be an emotional state that is likely to involve temptation to sin. Paul does not, for example, apparently feel the need to say “be happy, but do not sin” or even “be sad, but do not sin.” Anger, with fear perhaps as a close second, is an emotion that is particularly liable to tempt us to sin.

So what does it look like to be angry without sinning?

Dialectical behavioral therapy is a therapy modality that involves, among other things, the use of many handouts and worksheets on the topic of emotion regulation. Each major human emotion gets a worksheet, and each worksheet contains a section describing “Interpretations of Events that Prompt Feelings of [Emotion].” For anger, these can effectively be summed up by saying that we become angry when our interpretation of events suggests that a violation of how-things-ought-to-be has happened or is about to happen.

So a good first question to ask when we’re angry—and this is, I’ll admit, not as easy to do as to say—is to ask ourselves if we’re interpreting things correctly. Is there a real violation against the way things ought to be? Sometimes the answer to this is a

resounding yes! Sin is an obvious example here, and anger at injustice is so righteous that we use the language of anger to describe God's own response to exploitation and oppression.

But sickness and death can be sources of anger too, even when there is no sin or moral violation involved. We have a sense within us that the world itself is not fully as it ought to be. The resurrection means we do not have to fear death any longer, but death remains the last enemy of God to be defeated, and anger is a reasonable response to its laying hold to humanity, even partially or temporarily.

This question might help us understand whether anger is the appropriate emotion to feel in response to a given situation, but it still doesn't tell us how to be angry without sinning. The answer here, I think, is both simple and difficult: the standard is love. When anger curdles into a desire for the suffering of others, for payback and punishment, it becomes sinful wrath that is incompatible with the love Christ calls us to, even for our true enemies. This kind of love does not mean feelings of fondness or the absence of anger; it only means that we speak and act in ways that are oriented to the well-being of the other, be they friend or foe.

I don't mean to suggest that this is easy; in fact, on our own it can be impossible. This kind of love, and the self-control that it requires, are the fruit of the Spirit.

Finally, don't let the sun go down on your anger: don't let it consume you, no matter how just your cause. Anger and love aren't incompatible; neither are anger and joy or anger and peace. As soon as your anger starts to choke out any of the fruit of the Spirit, it's a sign that you may be dealing with sinful wrath instead. In your anger keep watch not only that you not sin against your neighbor, but that you not sin against yourself.