

How to Kill Relationships and Irritate People: Use Anger to Get What You Want

James 1:19-21

Mark Vroegop

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (James 1:19-21).

Pride is contending with God for supremacy. It is a sneaky and pervasive sin that affects all of us. No one is immune from pride. And, if we are honest, it is much more prevalent than what we even realize.

For example I received an email from a church member who wanted to share with me a funny way that pride manifested itself in their family. They were riding home from church when their two kids started fighting and arguing in the back seat. The mom could hear statements like: "I'm right and you're wrong...No, you're wrong and I'm right!" Upon hearing this, Mom wisely said, "Sounds like some pride is rearing its ugly head back there...when you always think you are right and someone else is wrong, that is pride." After a long silence from the back seat, the children said, "You're right, Mom." Then Mom replied, "Now that's an example of humility. Good job!" To which one of the children said, "Well, I said it first!"

Pride is sneaky, isn't it? It surfaces in being argumentative, defensive, stubborn, easily angered, being condescending, and interrupting people. It is at the root of the fear of man, insecurity, comparisons, and not being open to correction. Pride kills relationships; it irritates people. But there is something worse: God opposes the proud person.

We are in the middle of a five week series on relationships. Last week we looked at pride. Over the next four weeks we are going to look at what God's Word says about the following subjects:

- Using anger to get what you want
- Living with unresolved conflict
- Saying whatever you want
- Never being satisfied

This is an important series because this is the real stuff that we deal with all the time, and if we can, by the power of the Word, change our lives it will create a passion to follow Jesus in us and others. I met a young couple who came to College Park for the first time last Sunday because the woman was cutting the hair of one of our teenagers, and she asked her how she was doing. "Great," she said, "I had the most wonderful Sunday. God really spoke to me." Well the beautician asked her where she went to church, and she and her husband were here on Sunday. Life change is attractive and contagious.

Today we are looking at the subject of anger, and I have chosen to look at it second because it is the most common expression of our contention with God for supremacy. In other words, we use anger to try and get what we want. Anger kills relationships.

The Command: more listening, less talking, less anger

The book of James is about real religion – the kind of belief that is matched by works. Verses 19-21 are in a broader section of Scripture that is talking about being doers of the Word (1:22), and the connection between spiritual maturity and one's speech (1:26). James wants those who claim to know Christ to show that their faith is real, and he specifically wants it to show up in relationships. The command in verse 19 doesn't make sense if you are on a deserted island all by yourself. Verse 19 assumes a relationship context.

What is the command? James is commending more listening, less talking, and less anger. The text says, "...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." He is speaking to brothers in Christ - "my beloved brothers", and he is offering something that they should take note of – "know this." He is offering wisdom and providing a clear application of his "true faith is shown by your works" teaching. In other words, faith in Jesus affects how you listen, how you talk, and how you handle anger.

The word for anger here is the word *orge* that means to seek revenge and punishment. It can mean a sudden, impulsive and outward anger or (normally) a deep seated, slow-burning, internal anger. The other word for anger is *thumos*, and that word is associated with wrath, particularly God's wrath. It is important for you to see that there are really two kinds of anger – internal and external. Stuart Scott, in his booklet [Anger, Anxiety and Fear](#), lists the following examples of the two kinds of anger:

- **Vented Anger** – yelling/screaming, slamming things around, cursing, telling someone off, attacking verbally, name-calling, hitting.
- **The Slow Burn** – clamming up, moodiness, being frustrated, being irritated, being disgusted, glaring.¹

¹ Stuart Scott, [Anger, Anxiety and Fear](#), (Bemidji, Minnesota: Focus Publishing, 2009), 5.

However, anger is not the only problem. The Bible links anger with our communication; it connects how we talk and listen to issues with anger. The reason that the Bible does this is because God knows that most of our sinful communication springs from a heart that is angry. The Bible has a number of warnings about anger and how we communicate:

- A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult (Prov 12:16)
- A man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated (Prov 14:17)
- Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly (Prov 14:29)
- A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov 15:1)
- A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention (Prov 15:18)
- Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city (Prov 16:32)
- Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare (Prov 22:24-25)
- Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control (Prov 25:28)

Do you know what the problem is with these verses? They are not new information to us! No one is going to leave today saying, "Wow, I had no idea that anger was destructive." Everyone knows that it is better to be controlled than to be a hot-head, better to be cautious than to be caustic with your words, better to be tolerant than intolerant. We all know that Proverbs 29:22 is true – "a hot-tempered man commits many sins."

Let me give you list of some additional sins rooted in anger:²

- **Frustration** – being angry at whatever or whomever is blocking or hindering our plans.
- **Resentment** – internalizing anger by holding on previous wounds and dwelling on mistreatment.
- **Bitterness** – a feeling of on-going animosity because of a real or perceived wrong. It is usually unexpressed and polite.
- **Hostility** – the outward expression of internal bitterness through denigrating, hateful speech or actions. It often involves communicating disdain to other people.
- **Strife** – open conflict or turmoil between people.

² Jerry Bridges, Respectable Sins – Confronting the Sins We Tolerate, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2007), 69 & 130-133.

What a list! Anger is at the root of all of them. God wants us to see how devastating anger can be and put it away. God takes this seriously.

30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph 4:30-32).

And yet our struggle with anger is not because we don't know it is bad; we lose the battle with anger because of what we want or desire. Anger is a primary expression of pride in the heart.

The Reason: My anger doesn't produce righteousness

Verse 20 gives us the heart-based, God-centered reason why anger is bad: it doesn't produce the righteousness that God requires. Now James is not using the word "righteousness" in the same way that Paul does – in a legal, forensic, and justified sense. Rather he is referring to the kind of righteousness that is pleasing to God, the kind of actions that fit with God's plan. Anger is not effective in producing actions and attitudes that are pleasing to God.

There are at least two immediate implications of this that James probably had in mind. First, it applies to those people, who in their self-righteous and deceived hearts, justify their anger because they think it accomplishes God's goal. These people get angry and they justify it as being a part of God's justice or because of what it produced. For example, a parent may get sinfully angry at his or her kids, and justify it because it led the children to change their behavior and "obey." Or they may discipline their children out of anger because they are so upset over what the child did.

Secondly, this applies in a more general sense to the simple fact that anger doesn't produce behavior that is pleasing to God.³ Anger doesn't usually exist alone. Anger expresses itself in actions that are typically sinful.

Now you might wonder, "What about righteous anger?" That's a good question because there certainly is a kind of anger that is not sinful. However, let me say that most of the anger in our lives is not righteous anger, and I would caution you on being wary of self-deception, finding ways to justify your sinful anger. That said, what does righteous anger involve? Let me give you three characteristics – IFE:

³ Douglass Moo, The Letter of James – Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 200), 84

1. **Right Issue.** Righteous anger responds to real and actual sin. "Righteous anger does not result from being inconvenienced or from violations of personal preference or human tradition. It responds to sin as objectively defined by God's Word."⁴
2. **Right Focus.** Righteous anger focuses on God and His Kingdom...not me and my kingdom. This kind of anger is moved because of God-centered not self-centered concern.
3. **Right Expression.** Righteous anger remains in control. It is not all consuming, explosive, or self-despairing. It doesn't withdraw from or ignore people. It seeks justice, rebukes transgressors, confronts evil, and calls for repentance.⁵

So there is such a thing as righteous anger, but we are far more familiar with sinful anger. Where does sinful anger come from? We need to see that the decision to get angry relates to a choice between God's righteousness and my own desires. Anger begs that question, "Is being pleasing to God really important to me or not?" It is an expression of my battle for supremacy with God. Sinful anger manifests itself when my desires and God's designs clash.

When you came in this morning, you received a hand-out from Paul Tripp's book Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands. You can see the progression from desire to demand to need to expectation. Each step along the way creates more emotion, more expectation, and if your desire is not met you will need to decide who runs your life – your desires or God's designs. In other words, who is really supreme?

Anger is the fruit of desire and demand. Puritan pastor Richard Baxter defined anger as "the rising up in the heart passionate displeasure against an apprehended evil {something bad}, which would cross or hinder us from some desired good {what we want, perceive as good}."⁶ In other words anger is what we feel when our desires are hindered.

Therefore you have to realize that anger doesn't just happen. There is a thinking pattern, a desire pattern that is running beneath. Angry people do not stop and think. They just feel angry. So when you feel angry you've got to ask yourself three questions:

1. **Why am I angry?** Do not allow anger to simply exist; its power lies in its emotion and its lack of rational or biblical thinking.
2. **What do I want?** Try to evaluate what is at the root of your anger. What is it that you want? What are you being denied? What loss is happening?
3. **What do I love?** Evaluate how your desire fits with the righteousness that God wants to produce. How does your desire fit with God's supremacy?

⁴ Robert Jones, Uprooting Anger – Biblical Help for a Common Problem, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2005), 29.

⁵ Jones, 30.

⁶ Jones, 17.

When we lived in Michigan we built our own house, and about 6 months after we moved in the drywall seams going up the stairs began to buckle and blister. I didn't want to call a professional because I watched them install it, and I was pretty sure I knew how to fix it. I spent an entire Saturday morning putting drywall mud on the wall, trying to feather it out. I just couldn't get it to look right. The mud was too thick, the edges too clear, and by the time I was done – it looked worse. My family could sense that my frustration was rising, and I could feel sinful anger welling up inside of me but I kept trying. I went out to the garage to get a tool, and as I started to walk into the house I chucked the old tool into the tool bucket – hard! Just as I released the tool, the garage door opened and my wife saw the whole thing. She gently grabbed me by the arms and said, "Honey, I know you are frustrated. But it is only drywall." Her words hit my heart – hard! It is only drywall.

My desires had gotten the best of me. I wanted an easy project. I wanted things to go my way. And when they didn't – I got angry. My desires collided with God's designs.

How To Deal With Anger

Anger is rooted in pride and it kills relationships. It is one thing when you are angry with drywall mud; it is another matter when you are angry with someone else. What do you do if you are struggling with anger:

1. Recognize that your anger is usually sinful

You need to learn to carefully and quickly evaluate if your anger is indeed righteous, and usually it will not be. Most of the time that we get angry, it is because of selfish reasons. Stop making excuses. Stop justifying it. Stop tolerating it.

2. Confess your sinful anger

Pride is at the root of your anger, and there are few things better for severing pride than confession. You will never be free from your anger until you learn to confess, without excuse or justification ("I wouldn't have been angry if you hadn't..."), your sin. You are angry because you are proud.

3. Learn to trust in the sovereignty of God

We must learn to live very practically under the supremacy of God. We need to give up our desire to control our own lives. The problem with anger is our failure to trust in God. We need to learn to live with a robust and daily understanding of God's sovereignty.

4. Choose to love

1 Peter 4:8 says that love covers a multitude of sins. We need to be the kind of people who can overlook the faults, failures, and disappointments of others. 1 Corinthians 13:5 says that love keeps no record of wrongs. Replace your anger with love which means more than a feeling. Overcome your bitterness and anger by becoming kind and tenderhearted (Eph 4:31-32).

5. Develop a forgiving heart

We need to have the kind of hearts that are ready to forgive someone should they ask for our forgiveness. We need to remember how much we have been forgiven and to see people through a lens of grace, especially in light of the amount of grace that has been poured out on us.

Listen anger kills relationships.

- Do people have to walk around egg-shells with you?
- Do you know what your countenance communicates?
- Are you a hard person to have a discussion with?
- Do you continually interrupt people?
- Can you discuss difficult subjects without it becoming overly emotional?
- Do you have a list of grievances against certain people?
- Are you easily angered?
- Are your kids starting to sound like you?

Anger is one of the most obvious expressions of a proud heart. It surfaces when your desires collide with God's designs.

And if we are going to have relationships that honor Jesus and display him to the world, then we are going to have to learn in fresh and new ways that:

God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble

and

The anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness that God requires.

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