

Dealing with Anger without Losing Your Soul



Christopher News Notes

EVERY LITTLE THING GETS ON YOUR NERVES LATELY: a driver cut you off in traffic and didn't even bother to look, your spouse forgot your anniversary... *again*, the boss is making unreasonable demands on your time, and it's bringing up memories of a bully from your past.

Allowing anger to dominate your emotions puts your physical, mental, and spiritual health at risk. Fortunately, we don't have to be slaves to our anger. We can learn to deal with it without losing our souls.

When Anger Can Be Dangerous

“Imagine your anger to be a kind of wild beast, because it has ferocious teeth and claws, and if you don't tame it, it will devastate all things, even corrupting the soul.” —St. John Chrysostom

Father T.G. Morrow, a theologian and marriage counselor, noticed a common thread among the couples he was helping. Everybody was angry about something. Whether they kept their anger in or allowed it to explode, whether it was prompted by little annoyances or big hurts, the anger in the room made it difficult to find the way back to trust, communication, and love.

Anger destroys our relationships with others, with ourselves and with God, too, if we let it. That's the reason why anger is numbered among the seven deadly sins—the habits that kill the soul.

Recognizing the true source of anger tells us something about why it can be so lethal. Catholic author Bryan Mercier, who returned to the Church after a troubled adolescence, shared his insights with Marcus Grodi on EWTN's *Coming Home Network*.

“If you had met me back then,” Mercier said, “you might see me dressed all in black, carrying weapons, looking for a fight, wanting to hurt people...These are the kinds of things I'd do to numb the pain that I kept trying to ignore...For years, I didn't even want to look in the mirror, because I hated what I saw there. I thought I was the ugliest person on planet earth. I had rock bottom self-esteem. I desperately needed to be loved.”

Uncontrolled anger is often pain and a sense of worthlessness turned outward. (Turned inward, these are the sources of depression.) This kind of anger is a symptom, a red flag of caution—a cry for help.

In college, Mercier made friends who cared about him. That care opened him to God's care, and the need to release his anger. “I had prayed my whole life for God to change my heart,” Mercier remembers, “and He never had—and I realized that it

was because my life was full of anger and depression. He wanted to come into my life, but I hadn't left any room for Him.”

Even when our anger seems to be less serious—a fleeting irritation, a flicker instead of a bonfire—it can fester. “Bitterness is wrath's little sister,” wrote psychologist Dr. Gregory Popcak on his Patheos blog. “Where anger can be just and moral if it propels us to seek solutions for the wrongs we have experienced or witness, wrath is a deadly sin because it becomes anger that feeds on itself and adds to wreckage caused by the original wound. Bitterness does this too, but instead of burning down the house with everything we value still inside, bitterness is quieter, slowly poisoning our life until we lose it one joy at a time.”

Don't Let the Sun Go Down

“The best remedy for a short temper is a long walk.”
—Joseph Joubert, French moralist and essayist

So how do we manage anger in a way that's healthy and holy? For starters, we can admit we feel anger. Remember, the emotion itself is morally neutral. It's what we do with it that makes the difference. “Be angry, but do not sin,” St. Paul says in Ephesians 4:26. Easy for him to say, we might reply. He was a saint. But sanctity, as the hothead St. Peter proves, is no immunization against anger.

These four steps, recommended by counselors and saints alike, have proven to be most helpful:

1. Count to cool—Thomas Jefferson is credited with saying, “When you grow angry, count to 10 before acting. When you are very angry, count to 100.” Taking a time-out is not just a good strategy for toddlers who miss their naps. Counting, taking deep breaths, turning away, and going out for some air are all good ways to short circuit anger's harmful physical reactions of raised blood pressure and higher stress hormones. As St. Francis de Sales wrote in his eminently practical *Introduction to the Devout Life*: “When you feel [anger's] first movements, collect yourself gently and seriously, not hastily or with impetuosity.”

Additional Help with Anger

We aren't alone in struggling with this particularly difficult temptation. Here are a few books with more practical spiritual advice.

Overcoming Sinful Anger: How to Master Your Emotions & Bring Peace to Your Life, by Fr. T.G. Morrow (Sophia Institute Press).

Taming the Lion Within: 5 Steps from Anger to Peace, by Ronda Chervin, Ph.D. (Simon Peter Press).

Little Sins Mean a Lot: Kicking Our Bad Habits Before They Kick Us, by Elizabeth Scalia (Our Sunday Visitor).

2. Reflect and pray—Taking time out lets us perform the next necessary step in dealing with anger. When we reflect on what makes us angry, and turn it over to God in prayer, we can more easily put our hurt and irritation into perspective. We can also move the focus from ourselves to those who need our prayer most: the ones who make us angry.

Pray for the spouse who forgot again. Pray for the driver who cuts you off in traffic. Pray for the repose of the soul of the parents who never knew how much they hurt you. Praying for those we're mad at is difficult, to say the least. But this is the heavy lifting that allows us to free ourselves of sinful anger. Jesus pointed the way.

“Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Forgive those who hurt you 70 times seven times. That's not in our human nature,” writes The Christophers' Director of Communications Tony Rossi. “We want to hate our enemies, not love them. We want to damn our persecutors, not pray for them. We want to hold a grudge against those who hurt us, not forgive them. And yet, what do hatred and resentment do to us, if we're being honest? They corrode our hearts, minds, and souls. And as science has borne out, they're also horrible for our bodies and physical health. So in a way,

Jesus is giving us good medical advice, too, by appealing to “the better angels of our nature.”

3. Talk it over—Don’t keep anger bottled up. Don’t brew bitterness. If you can, talk with the person you’re angry at. Do it as soon as you can, with candor and a measure of calm. If that’s not possible, talk with a good friend, a relative, a confessor, a counselor.

4. Resolve it appropriately—St. Paul follows his admonition to avoid sinful anger with a solid recommendation: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Setting a time limit for seeking reconciliation keeps a flare-up from becoming a grudge. This is especially important in marriage. Rose Kennedy, in giving advice to young married couples, echoed St. Paul: “Make sure you never, never argue at night. You just lose a good night’s sleep, and you can’t settle anything until morning anyway.” Or, as a comedian once jokingly put it, “My grandparents promised to never go to bed angry. They’ve been awake for 52 years.”

Getting help, if it’s needed, is also key. There’s no shame in admitting we can use some guidance and intervention in seeking spiritual, mental, and physical health.

But It’s Righteous Anger!

“Fight all error, but do it with good humor, patience, kindness, and love. Harshness will damage your own soul and spoil the best cause.”—St. John of Kanty

Not all anger is an occasion of sin. Anger is an

appropriate response to evil and injustice. In many cases, “righteous anger” serves as a sting to the conscience, a spur to action in defense of others or to change unjust conditions. Even in a righteous cause, however, anger that becomes irrational and uncontrolled loses the cover of virtue.

Of course we all want to think our anger is righteous. Our human ego and false pride make it all too easy to believe that our anger is justified when we perceive injustice, especially toward ourselves. We nourish our grievances because they allow us to live in resentment and act with spite, as writer Elizabeth Scalia notes in her book *Little Sins Mean a Lot*.

A woman Scalia knew admitted that she had spent 25 years giving her husband and children the silent treatment whenever they made her angry. She said, “When someone makes me mad, I don’t talk to them till I get an apology. I have my dignity!”

Scalia questioned the woman’s approach, asking her to think about how much she valued her family’s presence in her life. This led the woman to expressing her anger more appropriately. The silent treatment ended—for that family, anyway.

Unrighteous anger often pops up on social media, where it’s easy to convince ourselves we’re upholding the right values, or defending the Faith, or educating other people out of their stubborn ignorance.

Tony Rossi recommends: “Choose your battles wisely, and engage in them with Christian civility and responsibility. And make sure that any anger you experience is short-lived and ultimately moves you toward positive action. The only person that long-term anger will change over time is you.”

Long-term efforts to deal with anger in a healthy way, on the other hand, will change ourselves and our world for the better.


“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

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Christopher News Note 609

ISBN: 8755-69601

“Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.”

—Mark Twain