

Counseling Angry Peopleⁱ

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Have you ever considered how many words and phrases there are in the English language that in one way or another relate to the problem of anger? Before you read any further, why not pause for 30 seconds to see how many you can call to mind?

The Terminology of Anger

Although I've never counted them, I've have it on good authority that the Bible has well over 500 references to various forms and manifestations of anger. So, let's begin our review of popular anger nomenclature by looking at some of the biblical terminology: *bitterness*, *anger*, *wrath*, *malice* and *hatred* (which the Bible says is analogous to *murder*). Then there is *vengeance*, *indignation*, *provocation* and *exasperation*. Let's not forget *contention*, *fighting*, *quarreling*, *having it in for* (*holding a grudge against*) someone.

The heart issues that generate sinful anger include *idolatry*, *covetousness*, (inordinate) *desires*, *pride*, *envy*, *jealousy*, *fretting*, sinful *judging* and *intemperance*. Different types of people are characterized by anger such as the *fool*, the *pugnacious man*, the *angry man*, the *furious man*, the *quick tempered man*, and the *contentious man*. What about the attending sins associated with anger—you know, those sins that attach themselves in one way or another (before, during, and/or after) to anger? Terms like *suspicion*, making *rash and uncharitable judgments* about others, *threatening*, *impatience*, *unreasonableness*, and all manner of *abusive speech* often lock arms with anger and march into our lives along with it to such an extent that it's difficult to distinguish where one begins and the other ends.

But wait. What about those other English words that we use to describe this emotion (and the thoughts and motives that produce it)? We often speak of being *mad*, of *losing our temper* or *losing our cool*, of being *touchy* (or as we say in the South of being *ill*), of *having a fit*, of *harboring hatred* or *nursing a grudge*, of being *frustrated*,ⁱⁱ *irritated*, *annoyed*, *mad*, *miffed*, *incensed*, or even *livid*. If someone (not us, of course) is really *upset* we might say that he is *furious*,

disgusted, outraged, enraged, seething, irate, full of acrimony, animosity, rancor, and malevolence.

We even have terminology that pictures the way we behave when angry. For example we speak of *venting*,ⁱⁱⁱ of *scowling*, of *snarling*, of *boiling* and *steaming* and *smoking* and *smoldering*. How about *glaring*, *snapping*, *barking*, *hitting the roof*, *brow beating*, *burning up* or *blowing up*, of being *spitting* or *hopping mad*?

We have ways to describe anger from a physiological perspective (from the impact it has on our bodies). These include such phrases as, *seeing red*, being *flushed in the face*, or being *chafed*. Other somatic expressions include *hot under the collar*, *foaming at the mouth*, *gnashing of the teeth*, *bristling of the hair*, and *flailing of the hands*. Too, I don't believe I mentioned "*I'm sick and tired of*" and "*he makes my blood boil*."

Is it really any wonder that we, as shepherds and counselors, have to deal with the sin of anger more than any other? After selfishness and pride, it is probably the most prevalent sin in all of life.

Where does one begin helping angry people? Perhaps the best place is to make sure they understand anger from God's point of view.

What is Anger?^{iv}

Anger is a God-given emotion. All of our emotions have been given to us by God and, therefore, have good purposes. Even jealousy, hatred, and fear have God-glorifying functions.

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:2)

There is a time to love and a time to *hate*. (Ecclesiastes 3:8)

You that love the LORD, hate evil: he preserves the souls of his saints; he delivers them out of the hand of the wicked. (Psalm 97:10)

Anger is an inward alarm system that often indicates the extent to which I am guilty of idolatry. Sinful anger is sort of like God's built in smoke detector—it lets us know that we are *coveting* something to the point of idolatry. Twice in the New Testament idolatry is connected to covetousness.

Mortify (put to death), therefore, your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: (Colossians 3:5)

For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Ephesians 5:5)

A very helpful passage of Scripture that speaks of conflict and its relation to idolatrous desires is found in the fourth chapter of the book of James. The Jewish Christians to whom the Lord's brother was writing were having such conflicts with each other that James used the words *wars* and *fightings* to describe the outward manifestation of their anger. The question he asks cuts right through such outward symptoms and focuses on the internal causes or motives of the anger. "What is the *source* of quarrels (*wars NKJV*) and conflicts (*fightings NKJV*) among you?" He then answers the question to reveal to his readers exactly what is at the heart of their angry disputes (i.e. what is in their hearts that produced their angry disputes.) "Is not the source [of these quarrels and conflicts] the pleasures that wage war in your members?" "Yes," is the understood reply. ^v

Sinful anger is a selfish response to not getting what I want. We become sinfully angry because our pleasures (desires which are not necessarily sinful in and of themselves, such as the desire for our spouses to respect us or our children to obey us) have become so intense that they are waging war within our members. When our desires (as good as they may be) become so strong that they wage a military campaign in our hearts, otherwise lawful desires become sinful, idolatrous desires—not because they are sinful desires *per se* but because they are desired inordinately. Our hearts covet them so intensely that we are willing to sin (to go to war and fight) either in order to obtain our desires or because we are not able to obtain them.

Like a largemouth bass that is lured away from the safety of its covering into captivity by a flashy, new artificial bait, our inordinate desires can draw us away from the safety of obedience to Christ into many different captivating sins.

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it brings forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, brings forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren. (James 1:13-16)

The two Greek New Testament words for *drawn (dragged) away* and *enticed* are borrowed from the words for hunting and fishing. What is it that your evil desires do to you? They entice you to sin. From inside your heart, they carry you away toward danger.^{vi}

Sinful Expressions of Anger^{vii}

***How do you know when your counselee's anger is of the unholy variety?
Here are a few things to look for:***

1. The counselee allows anger to control him.

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he who *rules his spirit* than he who captures a city. (Proverbs 16:32)

Like a city that is broken into without walls so is an angry man who has no control over his spirit. (Proverbs 25:28)

2. The counselee allows anger to become the dominant characteristics of his life.

A man of great wrath shall suffer punishment: for if you deliver him, yet you must do it again. (Proverbs 19:19)

Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man you shall not go: Lest you learn his ways, and get a snare to your soul. (Proverbs 22: 24-25)

3. The counselee keeps a running record of how he's been mistreated.

Love . . . does not think (does not keep a running account of) evil. (Corinthians 13:4, 5)

4. The counselee becomes resentful and holds grudge.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart: you shall in any wise rebuke your neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him. (Leviticus 19:17)

5. The counselee pretends that he is not angry.

Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another. (Ephesians 4:25)

He that hates dissembles with his lips, and lays up deceit within him; When he speaks fair, believe him not: for there are seven abominations in his heart. Whose hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness shall be showed before the whole congregation. (Proverbs 26:24-26)

6. The counselee takes vengeance into his own hands.

If it be possible, as much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord. (Romans 12:18-19)

7. The counselee attacks or hurts a substitute (for God or his offender).

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding angry, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. (Matthew 2:16)

How to Help Angry People

Here is a basic outline of how I train biblical counselors to help people who struggle with life-dominating anger. I pray it will be useful to you in your ministry (and, if necessary, in your life).

Teach them to distinguish sinful anger from righteous anger. Most of the references to the sinful anger in Scripture are of the unholy variety. Although it is possible for us to be angry and *not* sin, most people experience the sinful variety of anger much more than they do the righteous variety. Nevertheless, the mature Christian can distinguish one from another, especially in his own heart.

But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:14. cf. 4:12)

When our anger is due to concern that a holy God has been offended by another's behavior, then that anger is lawful. In other words, if we are angry because God's revealed will (as found in the Bible) is violated (that is, if we are angry as a result of someone's sin), our anger is not rooted in sin.

On the other hand, if our anger is the result of not having our personal desires met, that anger is probably sinful. That is, if we are angry merely because someone prevented us from having what we dearly wanted, our anger is unlawful.

Of course, it is possible (even probable in those situations where another person's sin against God is also an offense against us) to have *both* righteous anger and sinful anger residing in our hearts at the same time. We are often presented with scenarios in which others do something quite unbiblical, but the offense, in addition to being a sin against God, is also against us.

In such cases, communication is usually required (cf. Matthew 18:15; Luke 17:3). Sinful manifestations of anger on the part of the offender *as he communicates* his concerns will complicate resolving the matter. It is essential that the offended party deal with his sinful anger (i.e., get his heart in such a state that he is sure he has much more of the proper anger than he does the sinful anger, if any anger at all) before he proceeds with the process. Indeed, as we have seen, one of the conditions required to restore a sinning brother is to go "with a spirit of meekness" (Galatians 6:1).^{viii}

I am indebted to David Powlison who provided the idea for the following diagram. It is one of the best tools I know to help people determine whether or not their anger is sinful. I have found it to be a great teaching aid in counseling.

Unholy Anger	Holy Anger
When I don't get what I want	When God doesn't get what He wants
I am the lord of my life	Christ is the Lord of my life
My will is violated	God's will is violated
Motive: my heart's idolatrous desire	Motive: God's glory
I am god	God is God

Train them to harness righteous anger so it may be used to attack and destroy only those things of which God would not approve. When we are faced with a problem, we often experience great potential to become angry. People often resort to two extreme expressions of sinful anger. On one end of the spectrum is *internalization*. Some of us “clam up” when we get angry. We withdraw, cry, pout, sulk, walk away, retreat to another room, go for a walk or drive (without first committing to resolve the conflict later), and give those whom we believe caused the problem a “cold shoulder.”

At the other end of the spectrum is *ventilation*. The fool gives *full vent* to his anger (cf. Proverbs 14:16). Some of us “blow up” when we get angry. We resort to raising our voices, calling others inappropriate names, using profanity, throwing, hitting, kicking things, using biting sarcasm and various other forms of vengeance. Some individuals mix and match these responses. They blow up first, and then clam up; others clam up until the internal pressure builds to overflowing, at which time they blow up.^{ix}



Problem



Ventilation



Internalization

ANGER

Think of the circuit breaker in your home. When you are communicating without anger, the circuits are open and the electricity is flowing. When you (or the one with whom you are conversing) “blow up,” it shuts down the circuits, and the power is cut off. It has the same effect when one of you clams up. It is as if someone secretly accesses the circuit breaker and silently throws the switch, interrupting the flow of current. How often does anger short-circuit the communication between you and people with whom you are speaking?

How do you respond when you get angry?

- Blow up

- Clam up
- Blow up, then clam up
- Clam up, then blow up
- All of the above

In what *specific* ways have you preferred to express your anger?

Blow up responses

- Yelling / screaming
- Throwing / kicking /hitting
- Talking back (quarreling)
- Using biting sarcasm
- Name-calling
- Using profanity
- Contemptuous speech
- Saying hurtful things you later regret

Clam up responses

- Sulking
- Pouting
- Crying
- Giving “the silent treatment”
- Giving the “cold shoulder”
- Withdrawing / retreating
- Refusing to talk
- Going for a walk or drive

Breaking the Circuit

When my wife and I are having a conflict, we each try to express our differing opinions to each other in the hope that one of us will persuade the other of his or her point of view. So, we banter back and forth for five, ten, or twenty minutes until I persuade her, or she persuades me, or we meet somewhere in the middle (or we both conclude that it is perfectly fine for us to disagree). Back and forth we go, trying with each exchange of words to reach an agreement with each other with a minimal amount of sin (unbiblical communication).

The moment one of us becomes sinfully angry, the conflict comes to a halt. The communication circuit is broken, and no further progress is made. Typically, the angry person exits the conflict prematurely or his opponent exits the conflict in fear. The conflict is aborted in midstream without biblical resolution. I will illustrate this dynamic further in Part Two.

The expression of sinful anger is probably the greatest obstacle to resolving conflicts quickly. How is it with you? Think about your last conflict with someone. Did it go south rather quickly after someone got angry? Chances are that someone’s anger stopped the matter from being resolved swiftly.

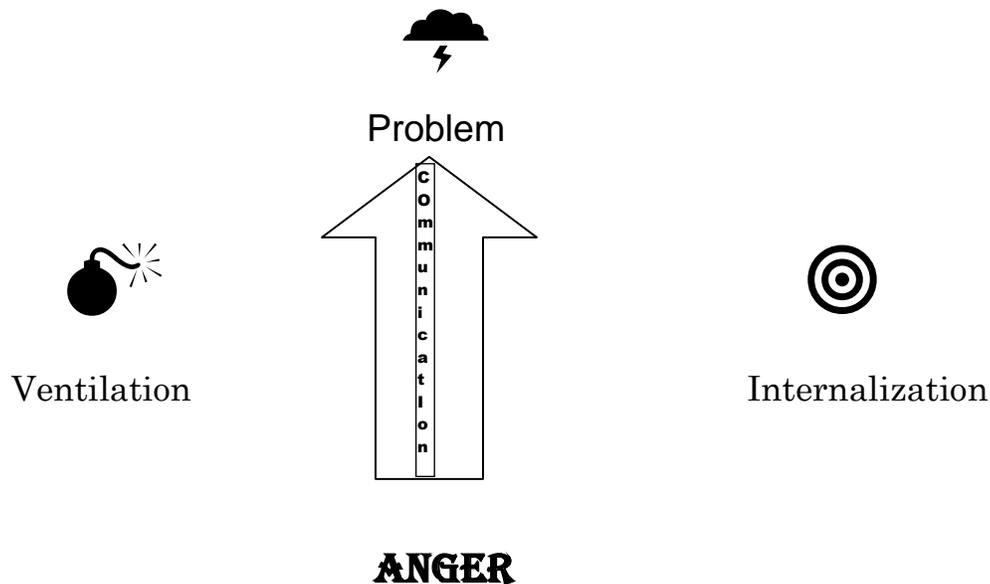
It has been said that anger is an emotion God gives to us for the purpose of

destroying (or at least attacking) something. When we “clam up” in anger, we hurt the person at whom we are mad, and we end up hurting (destroying/attacking) ourselves in the process. If we blow up, we destroy/attack the person at whom we blow up!^x

Rather than using these unbiblical approaches, God wants us to destroy or attack the problem by releasing our anger under the Spirit’s control (cf. Proverbs 16:32, Galatians 5:22–23).

Since most of our problems have to do with people, one action is almost always necessary to solve the issue. Ask your counselee, “What is it that we usually have to do in order to get the anger from our hearts directed toward destroying a problem that involves someone else (how do we attack the problem without attacking the person)?”

Communication is necessary in order to get the problem solved. If we want to learn how to communicate and resolve conflicts effectively, we must learn to control our anger. Let’s factor in the communication element to our diagram.



It’s sort of like the game of darts. God has given a set of darts that were designed for good purposes. When we get angry, we want to take action. The action we take will have consequences. If we choose to respond by fighting (blowing up) or by taking flight (clamming up), the problem will not be solved. More importantly, God will not be pleased with our efforts. Ask you counselee, “Are you going to throw the dart at your opponent in a sinful sort of way?” “Are you going to swallow the dart and hurt yourself in an equally sinful sort of way?” Or, “are you going to learn how to throw the dart at the problem so as not to injure

the other person by your words, attitudes, and actions.” Explain to him, “When you blow up, you are *miscommunicating*. When you clam up, you are *not* communicating. Either way, you are not doing with the dart that which God intended for you to do.”

Teach them how to think during times of provocation. When we are provoked, the adrenalin (and other chemicals) pours into our blood causing our heart to beat faster, our respiration to increase, our blood pressure to rise, and our perspiration to flow. Our thoughts race at upward of 1000 words per minute. And this all happens even if we are not being provoked by our opponent. On the other hand, when we are in a conflict in which we are being irritated and goaded by another person, we seem to respond without thinking at all.

This response is a problem for the Christians who are supposed to control and captivate their thoughts (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4–5). Psalm 15:2, 5 (which I typically refer to as a Psalm of stability) says that the person who speaks the truth in his heart will never be shaken. Love is not easily provoked (1 Corinthians 13:5).

“But” you might say, “In the heat of the battle, it’s hard to control our thoughts!”

It’s harder perhaps,^{xi} but not impossible for the Christian. There is good news, however, God has a remedy for this dilemma:

Prayerful Pondering

The heart of the righteous studies to answer: (Proverbs 15:28a)

Provide things honest in the sight of all men. (Romans 12:17b)

Few translations bring out the exact meaning of the verb that begins this imperative. It’s actually a participle that literally means to think of beforehand. God is saying (in the context of personal battles against evil) that we must plan our next response before the next battle. We must anticipate beforehand how we will respond to the conflict so that when we find ourselves in the heat of the battle, we will not retaliate in kind, but rather respond to evil (or provocations) with good. This approach is how soldiers are prepared for battle in basic training. They are drilled on how to fight before the battle so they will respond automatically in the right way in the heat of combat.

Ask your counselee, “Who is the one person you find yourself in conflict with most often? Do you know exactly how you are going to respond to him the next time he sins against you? Have you prepared your arsenal? Have you cleaned and loaded your weapons? Have you practiced fighting with him?” Remind him,

“If not, you’ll likely pick up the first (familiar but sinful) weapon at hand when the bullets start to fly (and thus be overcome by his evil rather than overcoming his evil with good, as Romans 12:21 commands.)

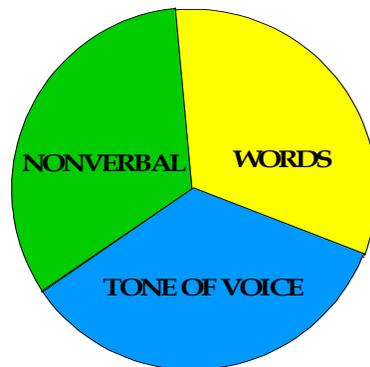
Another mental weapon Christians have at their disposal is the ability to interrogate themselves about their provocations. Train your counselees to ask themselves these questions when they are provoked.

- Has the other person really sinned against me?
- Am I lusting after an idolatrous desire in my life?
- Do I have all the facts, or am I jumping to a hasty conclusion?
- Is my heart magnifying a tolerable trial to the level of an intolerable one?
- What Scripture passages should guide my thoughts and words in this matter?
- How can I respond in a way that will attack the problem and glorify God?

Train them how to command not only their thoughts, but also their tongue, countenance, and body language during times of provocation.

Communication involves more than just words (cf. Proverbs 16:24). It also involves our tone of voice (cf. Proverbs 16:21) and our nonverbal communication (cf. Acts 12:17). If we are going to learn how to communicate (and resolve conflicts) properly, we must learn how to do so in all three areas.

Means of Communication



Of the three slices of the communication pie, the Bible places the greatest emphasis on words. As I have already explained, if there is ever a time when a believer ought to premeditate what he is going to say, it is in those circumstances when he is most likely to become angry. When we are angry (or experiencing other

intense emotions), we are at the greatest risk of sinning with our words. Controlling our anger (being gentle) means choosing our words carefully, especially when a problem exists that makes us angry.

The Bible also addresses the importance of using the proper tone of voice. “A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1). “The sweetness of the lips increases learning.” (Proverbs 16:21; cf. Proverbs 16:24, 18:23; Colossians 4:6). It is not enough for us to choose the right words. We must say the right words in a tone that is appropriate. Some communication professionals believe that in the English language, the message is communicated up to seven times more by the tone of one’s voice than by one’s words.

Suppose a wife was to ask her husband, “Honey, would you like some more meatloaf?” His “No, thank you” could be interpreted in two very different ways, depending on the inflection of his voice. “No [that was so good, I’ve already had three helpings], thank you [but, I couldn’t eat another bite],” he says in a pleasant tone. Or, he gruffly barks out, “No, thank you [I almost gagged forcing myself to swallow this slop]!”

Think about the many bad attitudes our voice inflection is capable of communicating: disrespect, anger, hatred, bitterness, contempt, vengeance, fear, anxiety, pride, condescension, harshness, superiority, self-righteousness, sarcasm, criticism, callousness, impatience, and indifference, to name a few. On the other hand, with the tone of our voice, we can also communicate such righteous attitudes as love, acceptance, compassion, forgiveness, patience, submissiveness, forbearance, humility, and gentleness.

The Bible has much to say about nonverbal forms of communication. Nonverbal communication encompasses such aspects as our facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, and touch. Some people believe our body language carries even more of the total communication message than words and tone of voice put together.^{xii}

Perhaps the best place to begin is with our faces. “Why are you angry?” the LORD asked Cain (Genesis 4:6), “And why has your countenance fallen?” Anger is one of several sins that the Bible specifically indicates can show up on our face.^{xiii} What is in our heart also bleeds through our countenance (cf. Nehemiah 2:2; Proverbs 15:13; Ecclesiastes 7:3). In the Bible, the word *heart* represents the inner man, and is invariably held over against the outer man (mouth, tongue, lips, eyes, countenance, hands, feet, etc.). Isaiah put it this way: “Their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, . . . (Isaiah 3:9a).

David refers to God as “the help of my countenance” (Psalm 42:11, 43:5). He realized that only God could remove from one’s heart the sins that mar the countenance. Solomon also understood the connection between man’s heart (the

reservoir of wisdom; cf. Proverbs 2:10, 14:33, and 17:16) and his face. “Who is as the wise man? and who knows the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom makes his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed.” (Ecclesiastes 8:1).

Now, since we can neither hear nor see the look on our own face, detecting inappropriate facial expressions is much more difficult than detecting wrong words or voice inflections. Our counselee will need the assistance of others (his family members or perhaps a few of his friends) to correct any inappropriate facial casts.

The single best correction one can make is to smile. At the very least, smiling lets people know that we *are trying* to communicate in a warm, friendly, pleasant, kind, and proactive sort of way.

Another important element of nonverbal communication is eye-contact. In some cultures of the world, it is considered rude to look at a person in the eyes. In our culture, it is generally considered rude not to look at people when talking to them. In 1 Corinthians 13:5, Paul wrote that love is not rude. When God counsels us, He is said to do so with His eye upon us (Psalm 32:8). Job said to one of his counselors, “Now therefore be content, look upon me; for it is evident unto you if I lie.” (Job 6:28). One of the clues that may indicate a potential lie is the dilation of the speaker’s eyes. Encourage counsees to look at people with whom they are having a conflict. Say to them, “As much as possible, make it a habit to practice to Stop, Look, and Listen when they are addressing you. *Stop* whatever else you may be doing when they begin talking to you. *Look* directly at their eyes. *Listen* intently to what they are saying to you.”

A final element of nonverbal communication is touch. The importance of expressing physical affection can be seen in the life of Jesus. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, “leaned on Jesus' breast” at the last Passover supper (John 13:23, 21:20). Jesus showed His compassion for quite a few people as He touched them in the process of healing their infirmities. In the context of marriage and the family, certain forms of touching (affection) are used to communicate feelings such as love, compassion, comfort, and sympathy. Ask, “How affectionate are you with people with whom you argue?”

Encourage them to remain quiet when angry in order to ponder an appropriate response. The Bible has much to say about the importance of thinking before we speak.

The heart of the righteous studies to answer:
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. (Proverbs 15:28)

In the multitude of words there lacks not sin:
but he that refrains his lips is wise. (Proverbs 10:19)

He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding:
but he that is hasty of spirit exalts folly.. (Proverbs 14:29)

A wrathful man stirs up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeases strife. (Prov. 15:18)

The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips. (Prov. 16:23)

The beginning of strife is as when one lets out water: therefore leave off contention,
before it be meddled with. (Proverbs 17:14)

The discretion of a man defers his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.
(Proverbs 19:11)

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to
wrath: (James 1:19)

A wise person slows down when he becomes angry in order to be certain
that his brain is engaged before he opens his mouth. He realizes that until he gains
composure, it will hurt his argument (and accelerate the conflict) should he open
his mouth.

He that has knowledge spares his words: and a man of understanding
is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holds his peace, is
counted wise: and he that shuts his lips is esteemed a man of
understanding. (Proverbs 17:27–28)

In certain circumstances, it may be helpful for your counselee to confess his
anger politely and humbly to the persons with whom he is in conflict. Perhaps
something along these lines would be fitting: “I have purposed with God’s help to
resolve this conflict biblically. Will you please help me express my concerns
without getting angry by listening carefully to my perspective?” Or possibly
something like this: “I really want to have a good attitude about this, but I am not
succeeding right now because I think you are not understanding my point of view.
Will you please pray for me that I will be able to talk to you about this without
getting sinfully angry?”

Several years ago, one of my children did something inappropriate that not
only deserved discipline, but also provoked me to anger.

“Go to your room and prepare for a spanking” I said rather gruffly.

“Dad, aren’t you a little too angry to spank me right now?” my daughter responded.

“I am angry!” I said, “Go to your room and pray for me!” I have long since forgotten what she did to deserve to be chastised that day, but the lesson she taught me that day, I will probably never forget.

Exhort them to deal with any bitterness toward those who have offended them by practicing biblical forgiveness.^{xiv} Bitterness is the result of not forgiving others. To be bitter at someone, is to have not truly forgiven that person. In other words, bitterness is the result of responding improperly (unbiblically) to an offense.

The Scripture speaks of bitterness as a root.

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; (Hebrews 12:15)

When someone hurts us,^{xv} it is as if that person dropped a seed of bitterness onto the soil of our heart. At that point, we can choose to respond in two ways. We can either reach down to pluck up the seed by forgiving our offender, or we can begin to cultivate the seed by reviewing the hurt over and over again in our mind. Bitterness is the result of dwelling too much on a hurt. Again, it is indicative of the fact that one has not truly forgiven an offender (cf. Matthew 18:34–35).

Bible Basics about Forgiveness

The following are some guidelines to share with your counselee about forgiveness. Most of the principles that follow have been extrapolated from Luke 17:3–10. Other passages have been cited where applicable:

1. Forgiveness is to be granted only if a sin has been committed against you.

Jesus said, “If your brother sins . . .” He didn’t say, “If he doesn’t give you what you want,” “If he lets you down,” “If he hurts your feelings,” or “If he profoundly disappoints you.” Your brother may do any and all of these things in the process of sinning but he is not in need of your forgiveness, unless he sins against you.

If what your brother has done to upset you is not a sin, it may be appropriate for you to talk with him about the matter at some point, but not before your thinking about the offense has changed. In other words, it is not your offender who

must repent, but you must repent of your unbiblical thinking as you took offense at something that God did not.

2. Sometimes the offended party must initiate forgiveness.

If you cannot overlook the transgression (Proverbs 19:11) or cover it in love (1 Peter 4:8), you are obligated as a Christian to go to a brother who has sinned against you and rebuke him. Sometimes, it is necessary to go to your sinning brother and tell him about his sin with the intention of being able to grant him forgiveness.

3. Forgiveness is costly.

When you forgive someone, it costs you something that is tremendously expensive. It costs you the price of the offense that you forgive!^{xvi}

More importantly, what it costs you is *minutia* compared to what it cost the Lord Jesus to forgive you of your sins. Unforgiveness is an odious crime in the eyes of Him who is the Judge of the whole earth. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus referred to the protagonist as “wicked,” who after being forgiven an incalculable debt, refused to forgive a much smaller debt.

Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, “O you *wicked* servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because you desired me: Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, even as I had pity on you? And his lord was angry, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. (Matthew 18: 32–34, *emphasis added*)

In light of how much we have been forgiven by God, not to forgive people who offend us is wickedness. It does not matter how much the offense we are struggling to forgive hurt us; by comparison to our offenses against God and the hurt we put His Son through, the offense that hurt us is *minutia*! It is even more wicked for us as Christians not to forgive than for our unbelieving friends who have not experienced firsthand so great a forgiveness as we have, and who have not been given the power to forgive through the Holy Spirit.

4. Forgiveness is fundamentally a promise.

In his insightful book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, Jay Adams explains:

When God forgives, He goes on record. He says so. He declares, “I will not remember your sins” (Isa. 43:25; see also Jer. 31:34). Isn’t that wonderful? When He forgives, God lets us know that He will no

longer hold our sins against us. If forgiveness were merely an emotional experience, we would not know that we were forgiven. But praise God, we do, because forgiveness is a process at the end of which God declares that the matter of sin has been dealt with once for all.^{xvii}

When we forgive, we are promising to hold our offender's trespasses against him no longer. We are also promising to impute our forgiveness to him (much like Christ imputed His righteousness to us when we believed). The dictionary defines the verb *impute* as follows: 1) "to charge with the fault or responsibility for"; 2) "to attribute or credit."^{xviii} When we promise not to impute our offender's trespasses against him, we are promising to no longer charge him for what he has done. This means we are not going to allow ourselves to dwell on the offense. We will refuse to cultivate those seeds of hurt, but rather will immediately pluck them out of the soil of our hearts. And, we will relinquish all rights^{xix} to get even.

When you promise to impute your forgiveness, you credit your offender's account with your forgiveness, much like Christ credited our heavenly account with His righteousness. You make every effort to think well of him, to pray for him, and to speak well of him, if possible. This promise, to some extent, can be made in the form of a personal commitment in your heart even if your offender does not acknowledge his sins to you. This action is sometimes referred to as "forgiving someone in your heart" (cf. Mark 11:25).

If he does acknowledge his sins and asks for your forgiveness, you will make this promise to him as you verbally grant him forgiveness. In such cases, you will be making two additional promises. The "not remembering his sins" concept is an implicit promise to never bring up the offense to him again. If you have forgiven someone, there is no need to discuss it again. Similar sins that he may commit in the future may require new confrontations. In addition, when you verbally grant someone forgiveness, you are promising not to tell anyone else about the offense.^{xx}

5. Forgiveness is not the same as trust.

If someone sins against us, it is incumbent upon us as believers to forgive that person as we have been forgiven by God in Christ (cf. Matthew 18:21–35). However, it is incumbent upon that person to earn back the trust he lost as a result of his sin. Forgiveness should be immediate. Trust may take time (cf. Matthew 25:14–31; Luke 16:10–12). To withhold trust after it has been earned is unloving. Paul wrote, "Love believes all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7). This truth means if we love someone, in the absence of hard evidence to the contrary, we will put the best possible interpretation on what he does. In this case, believing that the fruit of

repentance he has brought forth is genuine. Whether or not you are able to trust your offender quickly, you must always trust God to work through him and to protect you from danger.

6. Forgiveness does not focus on secondary causes, but on the sovereignty of God.

Joseph had to learn to trust in God's sovereignty. We sometimes think that when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (the secondary causes of his trial) he somehow said to them, "Don't worry guys, you mean this for evil, but someday you'll see that God means it for good," after which he broke out into a joyful chorus of Romans 8:28 ("We know that God causes all things to work together for good"). What really happened was disclosed years later by his brothers.

And they said one to another, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us."
(Genesis 42:21)

In the final analysis, God could have prevented the offenses that have tempted you to bitterness—but He didn't. Forgiveness focuses not on the offender's sin, but on how God (in His wisdom and goodness) may be using the offense for His glory. You should assume that God is more concerned about your response to the offense than the offense itself.^{xxi}

7. Forgiveness involves an act of the will—not the emotions.

If your offender repents, you must forgive him—quickly.^{xxii} Jesus phrased this concept in such a way as to make it clear that (in the absence of evidence to the contrary) you have to take your offender at his word and grant him forgiveness. Look again at Luke 17:4:

And if he trespass against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to you, saying, "I repent;" you shalt forgive him.

Even if it is the seventh time in one day that he has asked you to do so, you are to forgive him.^{xxiii} Jesus does not give you very much time to get your feelings in line *before* you forgive. You are to do it as an act of your will in obedience to God. Your feelings will follow. If you wait until your feelings change before you forgive, you may never obey the Lord's command.

“But what if *after* I forgive him, I begin to have feelings of resentment toward him? I’ll feel like such a hypocrite!” says your counselee.

Explain, “You will not feel that way if you learn to think biblically about the matter. After granting forgiveness, remind yourself that you made a promise to your offender. Don’t let that seed of hurt develop into a root of bitterness by dwelling on it. Pray for him and put your mind into a Philippians 4:8 thought pattern: (Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.)”

Rather than reviewing hurtful mental images from the past, or laying vindictive plans for the future (seeing the face of his offender on a dartboard, or on a baseball you are about to pulverize with your Louisville Slugger), Encourage your counselee to picture his face with the words “I’ve forgiven you” boldly imprinted across the image. Say to him, “Put your imagination to work on Philippians 4:8 (or other relevant passages of Scripture). You may be surprised at how much better you will feel, as well as how quickly you will forget once you truly forgive.”

Finally, remind him that forgetting is the result of forgiving, not the means of it. It is the final step of the process, not the first one.

Much more that could be said about helping angry people, but I trust what I have written here will assist you as you minister God’s Word to people under your care who struggle with this pervasive problem of petulant anger.

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The content of this article has been largely adapted from the author’s forthcoming book entitles, *Resolving Conflict: How to Make, Disturb and Keep Peace*, Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, © 2014 by Louis Paul Priolo.

ii Some people say “I feel frustrated” but that is probably not accurate. It’s usually more accurate to say “I am frustrated what I feel about being frustrated is anger.”

iii This is actually a biblical term, (“a fool gives full vent to his anger” literally, “he sends forth all of his spirit.”

iv I am indebted to Jay Adams, Wayne Mack and David Powlison for the essential concepts embodied in this section.

v Much of the material in this section has been adapted from my previous work entitled, *The Heart of Anger*, published by Calvary Press.

vi Priolo, Lou, *Pleasing People, How to Not Be an Approval Junkie*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers.

vii I’m indebted to Dr. Wayne Mack for the basic contents of this section.

viii

ix Jay E. Adams first published this paradigm in *What to do When Anger Gets the upper Hand*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R publishing

^x Any form of sinful anger hurts both participants. It hurts the other person by tearing them down, and it hurts us by producing guilt and damaging our reputation.

^{xi} All of those biological factors mentioned above are God-given and therefore have a good purpose. Perhaps these were given to us to help our brain (and mouth) function better in the heat of the battle.

^{xii} This is probably not as it should be. Although the Bible addresses all three forms of communication, the sheer preponderance of references argues that our **words** should be given the most significant attention.

^{xiii} To obtain an audio recording entitled “How to Improve Your Looks from the Inside,” which further develops the specific sins that can mar our countenances, go to <http://www.noutheticmedia.com/mp3-library/how-to-improve-your-looks-from-the-inside-out-1-2-mp3/> .

^{xiv} Much of the material in this section has been adapted from my booklet Bitterness: The Root that Pollutes, P & R Publishing.

^{xv} The hurt can be real or imagined; it makes no difference. The result is the same. If you do not deal with it biblically, you will become bitter. If I hurt you as a result of my sin and you choose not to overlook it or cover it in love (Proverbs 17:9; 1 Peter 4:8), you must follow Luke 17:3 and pursue me with the intent of granting me forgiveness, and I must repent. If you get your feelings hurt as a result of something I did which was not a sin, you must repent of your unbiblical thinking which caused you to be “offended” at something that was not a sin.

^{xvi} One of my graduate school professors used to speak of forgiveness as being analogous to giving an expensive gift. Basically, what we do when we forgive someone is to pick up his offense, place it in a colorful box, tie a pretty ribbon around the box, place a lovely bow on top, and then hand it back to the person whom we are forgiving.

^{xvii} Adams, Jay E., *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, (Amityville: Calvary Press, 1994), pp. 11–12.

^{xviii} *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third Edition, ©1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

^{xix} As a Christian, we really don’t have such a right as personal vengeance is something we are not allowed to take (Romans 12:17–21).

^{xx} If other individuals have a biblical need to know about the offense, you can lovingly urge the offender to confess to all necessary parties so that you will not be obligated to disclose anything to anyone.

^{xxi} Sometimes, an offense is God’s way of revealing to us a need in our offender’s life so that we might pray for (or even minister to) him.

^{xxii} If your offender does not repent, to prevent bitterness you will have to apply Mark 11:25. Jesus said “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.” You must, in other words somehow forgive your offender “in your heart.” I have prayed something like this on occasion, “Lord you know what my offender did and how much it hurt. You also know that what I really feel like doing is to give him a taste of his own medicine. But, I know that to retaliate in kind is wrong. So, in obedience to You, as an act of my will, I impute my forgiveness to his account just as You imputed Your forgiveness to mine.”

^{xxiii} This is not to say that *for his sake* you cannot call into question (urging him to examine) the sincerity of his repentance before you grant him forgiveness. Indeed, when there is *hard evidence* to refute his claim of repentance, it would be unloving not to call him into question (by asking him to explain the incongruity between his claim and the evidence).

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