

Learning from Anger

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Like guilt, the presence or absence of anger is an important index of spiritual health. While guilt has to do with the evil we do against others, anger is aroused by the evil which is done to us. While unforgiven guilt undermines our faith in Christ and our assurance of salvation, unforgiving anger destroys love and disrupts the flow of divine life in a Christian community. Both open our hearts to the attacks of the devil.

Like nuclear radiation, toxic anger can devastate Christian communities and families. When some Christian brothers or sisters sin against me, I am understandably indignant and hurt. It's not right for them to hurt me. So, unless they readily apologise, I distance myself from them and turn against them. I dwell on the hurt, nurture it, and add it to all the other hurts I have ever suffered. Since they are in the wrong and I am in the right, I feel justified in condemning them. I regard them as my enemies and lash out at them. And they return my frostiness and hostility with interest, which then stokes up my anger still more and turns my resentment into hatred. They have not just done evil; they are evil. Since they are my enemies, I avoid them and engage in secret, and sometimes not so secret, warfare against them. Sadly, I suffer as much, if not more, mentally and spiritually from this cold war as those who have hurt me, for I myself end up controlled and consumed by my own anger. I stew in my own bitterness and rage.

In Matthew 5:21-26 Jesus says that such anger is murder. Of course, anger in itself is not evil, for even God is angry at evil and injustice. What we do with our anger determines whether it is evil or not. When our anger is fired up, we can use it in one of two ways. We can either harbour it, so that it breeds bitterness, resentment, malice and hatred, or else we can harness it by seeking reconciliation with those who have hurt us. Self righteous anger turns us into crusading warriors and judges, bitter critics and cynics who can no longer love but are so filled with murderous hatred that we unwittingly commit spiritual suicide (see 1 John 3:14-15).

In Ephesians 4:26-27, 30-32, St Paul gives us some simple, sound advice on how to deal with anger. First, he warns us of its spiritual cost. If we go to bed angry, we open the door to the devil and give him a foothold in our lives. You see, the devil is our adversary (1 Peter 5:8), our accuser (Revelation 12:10). He not only accuses us of sin to drive us to despair, but

he also delights even more in rehearsing in great detail all the real and imagined sins which fellow Christians have committed against us. Thus he disrupts fellowship, unity and love. He seeks, above all, to isolate us from Christian community, so that as spiritual lone rangers we become easy pickings for him. Since this is so, Paul urges us never to let the sun set on our anger, but to deal with it day by day before it takes over and governs us.

Secondly, in Ephesians 4:30 Paul says that we are to let anger in all its forms be put away. We are called to let it be taken away from us. The passive form of the verb here is deliberate. No matter how hard we try, we can't get rid of anger by ourselves and break the vicious circle triggered in us by it. Only Christ can do that with his Holy Spirit. He suffered and died, so that he could take away our hurts as well as our guilt. He wants to rid us of our anger and all its evil baggage. We therefore can admit it to him and surrender it to him in prayer. We can dump all our hurts on him. In fact, he wants us to dump on him. But once we've done that, we can't reclaim it again and use it against those who have hurt us. So, just as Christ bore our sin bodily for us on the cross, he seeks to bear the abuse that we have experienced and rid us of our anger. But he can only remove it from us if we hand over to him both it and the hurts which feed it, as many psalms of complaint do.

Lastly, once that has been done, we can forgive those who have hurt us, no matter how grievous the hurt. We can forgive them in our prayer to God, as we do in the Lord's Prayer, or, better even, by saying so to another person, or, best of all, by seeking them out and saying so directly to them. Until we hand on the forgiveness which we have received from Christ, we will be the victims of our own anger and will remain imprisoned in it.

Anger is telling. It tells us much more about the state of our soul than we realise. By it the Holy Spirit reveals our hurts, so that Christ may heal them and build up the church through us. By it Satan seeks to destroy us and the church through us. The story is told that, when an old Egyptian monk, called Poemen, heard how someone, in his zeal for the Lord, had gone without food for nearly a week and then had lost his temper over some trivial matter, he said: 'He could do without food for six days, but he could not cast out anger'. That goes beyond all human power. Only Christ can do that by the gift of his Holy Spirit.