Understanding Our Feelings

Understanding Anger

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"If any person be in Christ, he is a new creature..."
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

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Before working through this lesson, take a few moments and list on the enclosed Response Sheet your definition of anger. Also list how the adults you observed while you were a child acted when they were angry. Then, put it out of sight until you finish this lesson. We also suggest that you read the lesson through the first time without looking up the scriptures. Then, study the scriptures. Finally, go back for a more in-depth study before completing the Response Sheet.

I. Introduction

Anger is common to all people of all ages. It is a part of human existence. At times we have all lashed out in anger or silently boiled in rage. There are invariably many areas ripe for anger in the common problems of mankind. Being human and being involved in anything worthwhile will expose us to anger producing situations. Anger can cause violent behavior or chronic grumpiness. Legions of common irritations can steal our joy and ruin our relationships. Learning how to handle anger is essential for anyone endeavoring to exhibit New Life Behavior.

In this lesson we will define anger and seek to understand it. We will cover the emotional, cognitive and behavioral components of anger. We ask the question,"Is anger a sin?" and explore the causes of anger. We will discuss Biblical illustrations of anger as well as the nature of God's anger. In the next lesson we will list some common *negative* ways of handling anger and also some *productive* ways to respond.

II. Defining and Understanding Anger

A. <u>What is Anger?</u>

Anger is a complicated human response. More than any of our other emotions, anger is composed of biological reactions, thoughts, interpretations of feelings, decisions, habits and sometimes even subconscious motives.

Anger varies from irritation and brief displays of temper to violent rages. The most common behaviors during loss of temper involve physical manifestations such as shouting, fighting, hostility and even physical abuse. But there are also hidden angers which manifest themselves in disagreeable attitudes, negativity, cynicism, sarcasm, passive aggressive behavior, school age nicknames, resentment, and a sullen attitude.

Sometimes people are angry with God. This is not necessarily wrong if it is expressed properly. In the Old Testament book of Job, Job was angry with God.

B. <u>The Components of Anger</u>

Anger involves an inner emotional response and an outer behavioral response. There are three components of anger: *emotional, cognitive and behavioral.* These components occur simultaneously so that a person experiences them as a *surge* of anger. By understanding this, it is possible to see that the way anger is expressed may be sinful, but the *feeling* of anger itself may not be. The feeling of anger is part of a God-designed internal system which can give people energy and motivation to tackle difficult and life threatening tasks.

1. *The Emotional Response*
   Feelings that we experience when we are angry are in part the result of our emotional response to a changing environment. Times of stress cause chemical changes in the body that result in increased blood flow and a larger production of blood cells to counteract infection. The liver produces more sugar to build up the body's energy. Any unfamiliar or stressful event can produce these physical reactions and cause increased heart rate and lung function, increased digestive activity and other arousal factors. This explains the link between anger and high blood pressure.

2. *The Cognitive Response (The Thought Process)*
   Many times people use the expressions, "I was so mad I couldn't see straight," or "I just got carried away," or "That kid makes me so mad!" These responses hide the fact that there are thoughts occurring prior to and during angry feelings which affect anger expression. How people respond to anger depends upon their mental interpretation of the event. A nurse taking care of a rude patient who is dying of cancer will have more patience with that person than she will have later that day with her rude husband.

3. *The Behavioral Response*
   The behavioral response to anger is made up of words or actions that people use or do not use as an expression of their angry feelings. These may range from silent sulking to violent homicide. The response may cause an *explosion* of overt anger behaviors (shouting, throwing, hitting), or the response may be covert behaviors (resentment, irritation, sulking), which if not dealt with, may eventually cause an "implosion" of hidden anger. This may lead to deep depression and even suicide.

C. <u>Anger: A Learned Response</u>

An anger response can be learned at an early age by examples of those in our environment. As in all areas of behavior, those with whom we associate can have a powerful influence on us. This is brought out in Proverbs 22:24–25, *"Do not make friends with a hot tempered man. Do not associate with one easily angered or you*

may learn his ways and yourself become ensnared." Anger can be a short-lived explosion or a general attitude of hostility. Since the expression of anger is learned, if our anger expressions are negative, they can be *unlearned*.

D. The Positive Side of Anger

Anger provides energy and motivation for certain difficult tasks. Anger, like pain, may serve as a warning that something is wrong with our attempts to relate to our environment. Anger may actually benefit our relationships when it is worked through positively with others. Anger can be a warning that something is wrong inside a person. Self-examination in these instances can produce personal growth.

E. Biblical Examples of Productive Anger

In Exodus 32, Moses burned with anger against the Hebrew people when they set up idol worship just as he had received the Ten Commandments from God. While the people were shouting, Moses threw the tablets of stone to the ground and burned the golden calf in the fire. With the energy of anger, he quickly regained control of the Israelites.

David, as a young boy, became angry when he saw members of the Lord's army frozen in fear of the giant Goliath (I Samuel 17). David's anger and sense of dependence on God allowed him to act even though he was afraid. Later in David's life he burned with anger as he listened to the prophet Nathan's story about the rich man stealing from the poor man (II Samuel 12). Perhaps it was this anger energy that allowed David to face the accusation that it was David himself who was the wicked man in the story.

F. Anger in Relationships

Sometimes we get angry with strangers, but more often our anger is directed toward those whom we love the most and with whom we spend the most time. Anger can work for or against relationships. *We can know that we can be in control even when we are angry*. People who have learned to express their anger properly will gain more respect than those who do not express anger or express it in negative ways.

G. Hostility and Bitterness

Hostility and bitterness are distinctly different from anger. By itself, anger is neutral, a natural response that may be expressed instructively or destructively. However, hostility and bitterness are not the result of a sudden surge of emotion; they are attitudes toward life and people. They arise when people hold on to their angry feelings and their unforgiving attitudes of resentment. Angry people aren't born angry;, they become progressively more angry as they fail to deal with their anger

appropriately. *Anger is temporary. Hostility and bitterness are of much longer duration***.** Hostile people originally may have had feelings of hurt, frustration or fear and became hate-filled in response to the offending person or situation. Human history is a long series of hostilities. Hebrews 12:14 advises us to make every effort to live in peace with all men; verse 15 tells why: "...that no bitter root rise up to cause trouble and defile many." Anger is the "root" referred to, and hostility is what sprouts from that root.

Hostility and bitterness usually result in hurting the one who is hostile and bitter far more than the one to whom the hostility is directed. This is why it can be very detrimental to health; it eats away a person's insides. It is like a beautiful bottle with acid inside; everything may look OK from the outside, but eventually the acid will eat all the way through. It is like dying from being stung over and over. By not dealing with their anger, hostile people develop such a habit of being hostile that they forget what made them angry in the first place; they are just "mad at the world."

Once we saw an interview of a woman on TV, a victim of a brutal rapist who had blinded her as well as caused other permanent physical disabilities. Asked if she felt bitter toward her attacker she said "no." She said that he had taken away her sight, but she was not going to let him take any more of her energy or time and that she would not let him rob her of the joy of life. How marvelous! She had learned how to keep from being stung by the same wasp over and over. She had effectively dealt with her anger.

H. Is Anger a Sin?

Anger is not wrong when it is defined as the arousal feelings one experiences to frustrating events. Anger itself is neutral, a normal human response. If anger is a normal response, why do certain passages of scripture teach that it is wrong (Colossians 3:8 and Ephesians 4:31)? Put in the context of Ephesians 4:26, anger is not called a sin but one is warned of the possible sins that can come from *unresolved* anger. The idea that anger is not a sin is supported by passages such as Proverbs 16:32 and James 1:19 which praise the one who is *slow to anger*. Another scripture that supports this idea is "Be angry and sin not." (Ephesians 4:26) Angry feelings are not sinful. *It is the sinful expression of anger or the improper motive that turns anger into sin.*

I. The Anger of God

More scriptures that support the idea that anger itself is neutral and not a sin are the many references that refer to the anger of God (Exodus 32:10, Numbers 11:33, Isaiah 65:15, Psalms 78:38). Psalms 7:11 says God is a righteous judge, one who expresses

His wrath everyday. But anger is only one part of God's character. God is also described as being *slow to anger* (Psalms 103:8; Isaiah 48:9; Jonah 4:2). He is merciful and loving. God's anger is directed by His righteous response to sin but limited by His patient and merciful character.

In the New Testament we see Jesus' getting angry and expressing it openly. In Mark 3:1-5, He is angry at the Jews' hardened hearts in response to His miracle of healing a man's withered hand. In John 2:13-15 the wrath of Jesus is shown as He drives the money-changers from the temple.

Paul is another example of one who showed anger without sinning. Paul addressed the churches angrily when they had to be corrected (Galatians 1:6, 3:1, 4:21 and 5:12).

J. <u>What Makes People Angry?</u>

Remember the TV series, "The Incredible Hulk"? In every episode the Bill Bixby character, before becoming angry and turning into the Hulk said, "Please don't make me angry. You won't like me when I am angry." This series fostered the myth that anger is an uncontrollable force within people. Anger can and must be controlled, but controlled anger is not necessarily unexpressed anger.

The answer to the question, "What makes people angry?" is nothing! People make themselves angry. "Fret not *thyself* because of evil doers." (Psalms 37:1) If people are angry, it is because they have *chosen* to be angry. Anger is a decision. Anger is a choice. The diagrams in figure 2-1, taken from Steven Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, are excellent illustrations of how we have a choice of how we will respond. The first diagram illustrates what Dr. Covey calls the "reactive model." This model shows, like the Hulk, the false but commonly held belief that we are victims of our stimuli—that we can't help but respond in a "knee jerk" fashion. The second diagram illustrates that between the stimulus and our response, we have a choice, and we can decide how we will react. Dr. Covey calls this the "proactive model".

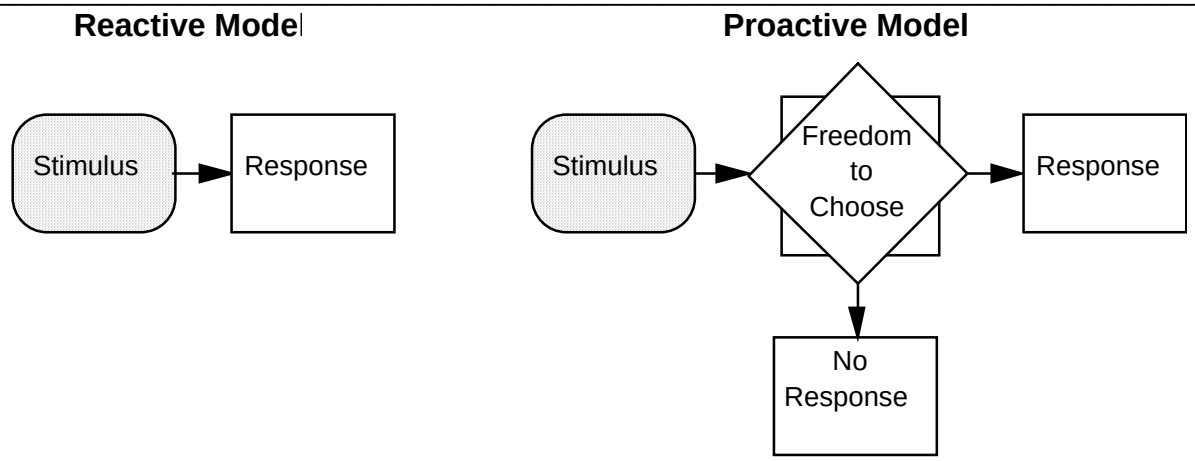

Figure 2-1. Two Models of Angry Behavior

K. Ventilation of Anger: Good or Bad?

An old Freudian theory for handling anger is catharsis or the emptying of the emotional tank. Freud thought this was a cure for anger. Ventilating activities such as talking it out, exercising, pounding pillows or plotting revenge were looked on as therapeutic. This kind of activity might be helpful in a small way, but ventilation can easily get out of hand. The problem with this kind of anger expression is that, more often than not, the physical reaction to anger becomes accelerated. It is like adding more fuel to the fire.

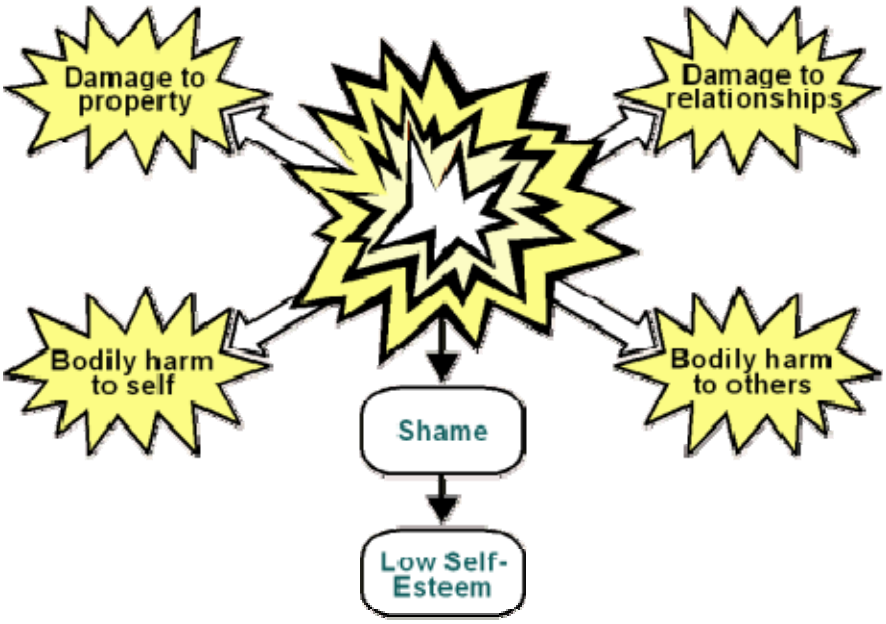

Figure 2-2. The Effects of Venting Anger

L. Self-Esteem, Anger and Loneliness

The more self esteem problems people have, the more self-absorbed their lives can be. To people who have low self-esteem, ordinary situations can sometimes become

threatening, and anger is not far behind. Feeling lonely or inadequate in life may lead to the need to feel first or most important. Ironically, when these people "wear their feelings on their sleeves" others will start tiptoeing around them, afraid of making them angry. The result is that the lonely person becomes even more lonely.

M. Frustration

A common contributor to anger is a feeling of frustration which results when people are blocked from their goals. A person who is more goal-oriented may experience more frustrations in life. The amount of frustration a person experiences depends upon the importance of his goals and his persistence in pursuing them.

N. Yielding Our Rights

A frequent cause of our anger is related to our perception that someone has violated a right that we feel we have. In fact, it is not possible to have a conflict with someone unless personal rights are involved. We may feel that we have a "right" to be respected, have personal health, earn money, not have a rude driver cut in front of us or have people break in front of us in line. When we feel we have a "right" to something, and when someone impedes on that right, we become angry.

Jesus yielded His "right" to be in heaven with God (Philippians 2:6-8) so that He could come to earth to fulfill God's plan. Abraham yielded his "right" to have his son when he purposed to obey God by offering Isaac upon an altar (Genesis 22:1-10).

The solution to yielding our rights and not becoming angry is to realize that everything we are and have is not really ours, but *belongs to God.* When we transfer ownership of everything to God, we can be confident that God will take good care of what is His. The concept of thanking God for whatever He allows to happen is the key to yielding rights. God may withhold certain rights from us for the purpose of forming His character in us. Ultimately, God is more concerned about *who we are inside* than about what we do outwardly. It may be that He wants us to deepen our spiritual life through the trials and irritations that He allows. Our anger may be seen as God's alarm system to point out to us areas that we have not yielded to Him.

All of us must eventually lose everything we have, including our successes and health, as we age and die. Of course, God means for us to value our work and our relationships, but if we put our faith in anything that can be taken away from us, whether it be mate or children or profession, we have put our faith in the wrong thing. Our relationship to God and His eternal plan for us is what can sustain us and never be taken away from us (Matthew 6:19-21).

III. Conclusion

Anger is a neutral feeling that is neither good nor bad; it is the expression of anger that may be sinful. We have a choice in how we will react to anger producing situations and do not have to be a victim of our own emotions. Angry feelings will affect us physically, emotionally and behaviorally. Anger has a positive side in providing energy and motivation to do difficult tasks or in showing us when we need to work on a relationship or on our own attitudes.

Now, please return to the enclosed Response Sheet **and write your answers to the study questions about this lesson.**