

# Anger is the Tender Virtue

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## Three Forms and Five Sure Cures of Sinful Anger

‘Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath’ (*Ephesians 4.26*).

He who would be angry without sin must not be angry at anything except sin. Our Saviour was angry with Peter, and angry with the Pharisees for the hardness of their hearts. Moses was filled with holy anger at the people over the golden calf. And God’s blessing is upon every such good heart, who has such feeling and stomach for the things of God. Equanimity in such circumstances would be no better than complacency or listlessness. ‘Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee?’ said David, ‘I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.’

This is the anger of zeal, found in Phinehas, Elijah, Elisha and supremely and perfectly in our Saviour. It should also have been found in Adam toward his wife, and in Eli toward his sons, and in Lot toward his servants.

Anger must have a good rise and a good end, observed Bucer; a good cause and a good outcome. The Lord condemns ‘whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause’.

It is no sin to be angry at sin, but when we are angry it is hard not to sin. Anger is a tender virtue, and through our ineptitude is easily corrupted and made dangerous.

There is, then, a just cause of anger, and there must be a just measure observed, so that our anger for sin does not rob us of the capacity either to pity the sinner (as our Saviour in his anger did the obstinate Pharisees) or to pray for him (as Moses did for those idolaters of *Exodus 32.31-32*).

Anger that is not thus contained is but a momentary madness.

## Three forms of anger

Damascen distinguishes three modes – anger, wrath, and hatred – saying that the first ‘has beginning and motion, but soon ceases; the second takes deep hold in the memory; the third ceases not without revenge.’

Clichtoveus compares anger (1) to fire in stubble; wrath (2) to fire in iron; hatred (3) to fire that is hidden (which only comes out of hiding when the object of hatred has been set on fire, and has burned out).

‘Some are sharp, some are bitter, a third kind are implacable,’ said Aristotle. The first are the best, as in the case of children, who are soon angry, and just as soon are happy again. So, says the apostle, ‘In malice be ye children’ (*1 Corinthians 14.20*).

Ursinus was of a somewhat hasty nature; so also was Calvin. Yet they had learned so well to moderate their anger, that they would not utter a word in their passion unbecoming a Christian.

Cassianus records that when a certain Christian was held captive by infidels and tortured by various cruelties and degrading taunts, he was mocked with the question, ‘Tell us now what miracle your Christ has done?’ His perfect answer was: ‘He has done what you see, that I am not at all moved at the cruelties and insults you throw at me.’

This was indeed to walk as Christ walked, who did not strive, nor cry, nor did any man hear his voice in the streets; who when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to him that judges righteously. Moses walked similarly when

murmured against by Aaron and Miriam; he was meek and did not complain.

The less a person strives for himself, the more God will be his champion. And as the wrath of man works not the righteousness of God, so it also hinders his justice. 'Wherefore,' says James, be 'slow to wrath.'

### **The folly of fury**

Anger is the fury of the unclean spirit who inflames the heart and sets the tongue on fire so that a person cares not what he says (as Jonah), or what he does (as Saul).

'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath,' says Paul, for this is to give place to the devil, who through anger enters the heart and takes possession. Many allow anger to so possess them that years pass, even many years, before they can be reconciled. Their anger becomes long established and deep-rooted, turning into malice (for anger and malice differ only in age). Anger permitted becomes malice, which is anger in its worst form – 'Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel' (*Genesis 49.7*).

Anger is the murder of the heart (*Matthew 5.22*), and in due course the murder both of the tongue and hand. So it is said: 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer.' He is a murderer in desire; he would be in fact if he dared.

First comes the hatred rising in the heart against a person, so that when one sees that person, one cannot abide him, nor speak to him, nor look at him, nor behave courteously and kindly toward him; but one's face falls, one even turns away. Then, when the heart is settled in this alienation, the hatred grows to wish and desire the hurt of that person, and even to rejoice when it can be accomplished; as when Joseph's brethren had cast him into the pit. Lamech boasted of his manhood, though doghood was rather what he had.

The worst sort of anger is that which, though for a time smothered and restrained, will suddenly burst out and flame up into further fury, as we see in Cain, who killed his brother.

Erasmus mentions Friar Augustine of Antwerp who openly in the pulpit there told the people that he wished Luther were there so that he could bite out his throat with his teeth. No doubt the friar would have proceeded to the altar with his bloodstained teeth to 'receive' the body of Christ.

A foremost executioner of martyrs in the days of Queen Mary was so angry when Elizabeth came to the crown, that he never failed to curse her daily in his grace at table, and was hanged for his treason in 1571. He was like the foolish bee, who lost her life to get revenge.

William the Conqueror furiously determined to get his revenge on the King of France who, being young and strong, jeered at his great belly. William entered France at the height of the harvest, making spoil of everything in his path, until he came to Paris, where the King of France was, to face him with his insolence.

From there he marched to the city of Mantes, which he utterly sacked, and then met his own destruction; so ended his wars and his life together.

His successor, Edward I, went further in his anger, for going against Bruce, King of Scots, he commanded his son and nobles that if he died on the journey, they should carry his corpse about Scotland with them, and not allow it to be buried until they had vanquished the enemy and totally subdued the country.

Here was a mind so set on its earthly objective that it could not bear to leave off even after it had departed! Here was a heart so set on revenge, that it planned the carrying forth of that revenge beyond life! Are we mortal, and shall our anger be immortal?

'To be revenged is more honourable than to be reconciled,' said Aristotle. But this is the voice of nature. Scripture shows us better things, as when Abigail persuaded David when he was marching in anger, that it would be no grief to him, nor offence of heart, to bridle his passions

and to hold his hand from blood.

Cranmer's gentleness in pardoning wrongs was such that it became a proverb: 'Do my Lord of Canterbury a shrewd turn, and then you shall be sure to have him your friend for life.'

## Five measures to rule anger

How, then, are we to rule anger so that we 'sin not', and how are we to curb and restrain anger, and bring it to a good end?

**1** 'Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil' (*Psalms 37.8*). You do evil in fretting; you do worse in venting the feeling and allowing the fire to break out. When therefore you find yourself incensed, and annoyance growing, immediately bind yourself to silence until you are able to speak in a quiet and composed way; until the rushing heat be over – as Ahasuerus walked for a time in his garden before he passed sentence upon Haman.

A good way to reduce the heat of anger is to repeat some grave sentences of Scripture, such as – 'Be angry, and sin not; be slow to wrath; avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; submit to God; resist the devil and he will flee from you.'

The devil of anger, if resisted by Scripture, will surely flee, for he cannot abide it (*Matthew 4*).

We must also set ourselves to pray it down, as David did in *Psalms 39*. When Job's temper broke out, even Eliphaz knew enough to say, 'Surely you have restrained prayer, or else you would never be like this.'

**2** Get your heart purified by faith, for the faith of Christ brings patience. Learn it and love it; read it and retain it as your own, for cleaving to this will make you a better man or woman.

James says that wars and fightings come from lusts that war in our members, giving rise to internal unrest and disorder, and making us perverse and discontented with others. The wicked are as the raging sea, troublesome and tumultuous. The covetous person troubles his whole house.

Nabal was such a son of Belial, so fierce and furious, that there was no speaking to him. And David, when he had defiled his conscience and not yet repented of his adultery and murder, how cruel was he in his handling of the Ammonites for their behaviour to his ambassadors. He 'put them under saws, and under harrows of iron, and under axes of iron, and made them pass through the brick-kiln'.

The faith of Christ, however, moves us to the opposite way of behaving, for, 'of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.' And James says that – 'The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits.'

**3** 'Study to be quiet, and to do your own business.' Do not meddle with squabbles that do not belong to you, lest you take 'a dog by the ears' (*Proverbs 26.17*). Avoid contentious, angry company (*Proverbs 22.24*), for like mad dogs they bite and make others as mad as themselves.

Do not listen to talebearers for they separate even good friends. Do not pry into other people's faults. Seldom is a patient man inquisitive, or an inquisitive man patient.

Make up your mind that you will put up with many ills and wrongs while you are here in this world, because if you cannot bear injury, it will be necessary to pack up and be gone out of the world, for here is no place for you!

Many things are to be ignored and winked at, just as the lion takes no notice of the barking of curs. Pills must be swallowed down whole, not chewed, and so it is with injuries. So, by meekness, we may prevent many outbursts of anger. It requires much care to live quietly!

**4** You must keep before you a true picture of anger, seeing these three aspects: first, the deformity of it; second, the disgrace of it; and third, the danger of it.

First, what an ugly thing is anger, detaching a person from self-control, and disfiguring his appearance with glaring eyes, furious expression, and distorted features – even to flaring of nostrils! The Hebrews call anger ‘aph’ (the nostrils; the breath; the face), because the nostrils flare, then the colour changes, the tongue stammers, the teeth gnash, the hands clap, the feet stamp, the pulse beats, the heart pants, and the whole person swells like a toad and flushes in the face.

Furthermore, it brings disgrace to a person. The Holy Spirit, in Scripture, has stigmatised the angry person as a fool, indeed, a person who exalts folly; setting it up on high to be seen by all, he proclaims himself the worst of fools. A person, says Solomon, is so noticed for his anger that – ‘Proud and haughty scorner is his name, who dealeth in proud wrath.’ What a name or title!

Thus God loads such a person with disgrace. And while he thinks by his big looks and high-flown language to carry force and influence, loss of self-control, unreasonableness and even impotency of mind are what others see.

It is often weakness and immaturity that lead to unbridled temper, as we see in many sick people and in infants.

Lastly, the danger of anger is to be seen in the way it consumes the body and ruins the personality. Persistent and worsening temper promotes ill health, and boils the heart in brine until it makes an end of the owner, who is undesired while he lives and unlamented when he dies.

As for the poor soul of such a person, anger makes it disinclined for prayer or any other duty to God or man, and the bearer of that soul is laid open like an unwallled city to many sins and miseries (*James 3.16; Proverbs 29.22*).

**5** Consider often and carefully God’s oversight and superintendency of your life, and his provision for you, and the privileges of his presence with you and his patience toward you.

First in this, remember that those who wrong us (however malicious they may be) are the instruments of his good oversight to accomplish our greatest good. Why then should we be angry at them? Is not this to be angry at God? If God is angry with us, there is hope of mercy; but if we are angry with him, what help is there for us, should his wrath be ‘kindled but a little’?

Such reasoning restrained Job from letting fly at the Chaldeans who robbed him, as well as other calamities, for he said: ‘Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly’ (*Job 1.21-22*).

Therefore reverence God’s providence, and be still (*Psalms 39.9*). Remember, no one could have power against you, except it were given from above (*John 19.11*).

Next, consider God’s presence, and be careful. Put God first, yes, before your passions, and they will soon be hushed, like unruly, quarrelling soldiers as soon as an officer appears.

When the heart boils with anger and desires revenge, ask with the disciples, ‘Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?’ Ask permission from God before you dare do anything in an angry way. Never presume that you are God’s appointed executioner!

We used to say that if the magistrate were not present, we were entitled to take the law into our own hands, but if the magistrate were present, there was no excuse. However, Scripture says to the people of God, ‘Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door’ (*James 5.9*). He is an eyewitness of every token of impatience and exasperation on your part. ‘Fear ye not me? saith the Lord: will ye not tremble at my presence?’ (*Jeremiah 5.22*.)

Job, having fallen to many angry complaints, as soon as he is truly aware of God’s presence,

says, 'I will lay mine hand upon my mouth . . . I will proceed no further.'

Consider lastly God's infinite patience and longsuffering in bearing with our behaviour, as he bore with those in the wilderness. How slow he is to anger, and how plenteous in mercy! God judges the righteous, but very gently. He calls affliction his strange work, and he does not go about it until there is no other way, because we have mocked his messengers and despised his words (2 *Chronicles* 36.16). When God came to punish Adam, he came slowly and in the cool of the day. He did not run upon him, as David did upon Goliath, and cut off his head. He came with a soft pace and small voice, and not until the evening. Then, before the sentence, he conversed with him and promised him a Saviour from the deadly sting of the serpent.

Just think about the record of God's patience with you (as they once did, gazing upon the brazen serpent), and your hearts will be curbed and cured from wailing in impatient anger.

Adam was the masterpiece of God's handiwork, in whom he rested and rejoiced. He adorned him with his own image, advanced him to dominion over all other earthly creatures, honoured him with the possession of paradise, and the possibility of Heaven, and gave to his race alone the honour of being able to call him Lord.

But man, being in honour, threw it away and became like the beasts that perish, indeed worse, for he became like the devils, with whom he should have perished, had he not had a pardoning God. 'Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity?'

God still multiplies pardons as we multiply provocations, and stretches out his hand all the day long to a rebellious people. His grace even, as it were, kneels to us, beseeching us to be reconciled, and bearing with our appalling practices.

If we only considered how infinitely great and mighty he is, armed with all power, and higher than the highest, we would all the more wonder at his patience toward us. For the higher the person, the less patient he generally is of wrongs.

The high virtue of patience is seen from the self-satisfaction that seizes the worldly man who on occasions may attain to it. Let a man put up with an injury just once or twice from another, and he holds himself in high admiration, and conceitedly thinks he deserves to be chronicled, or canonised a saint (as Henry VI imagined).

But what is all this to God's infinite patience in suffering wrong? And not from the vessels of wrath only (*Romans* 9.22), but from his own elect, who should be better. He spares them as a man spares his son that serves him, forgiving them seventy times seven in a day, passing by without grievance a world of infirmities.

The deep and due consideration of the infinite patience of God toward us will greatly promote the patience of our spirits, and transform us into the same image.

### **Humility and Self-Watch**

Lastly, to these means and meditations, add a constant campaign to become low in your own estimation, and to keep a strict watch over your heart. Then you will be able to hold yourself when impatience or anger or resentment begins to boil in you. And if you urgently pray to subdue such passions, seeing them as unjustified and exposing their ugliness and sinfulness before your God, you will soon see that 'your labour is not in vain in the Lord.'