



## COUNSELLING ANGER

Joel James  
(student notes)<sup>1</sup>

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Jay Adams on the need to counsel anger:

*Sinful anger probably is involved in 90 percent of all counselling problems. (The Christian Counselor's Manual, 359)*

### Identifying Anger: Case Study—King Saul

**First Incident:** 1 Samuel 18:1-9

What were Saul's sins?

What did Saul want?

**Second incident:** 1 Samuel 20:30-34

What were Saul's sins?

What did Saul want?

Conclusion:

Saul's anger left his kingdom, his family, and his relationship with David (his most able courtier) in shambles.

### Seven destructive results of anger:

The following are often the things that motivate angry people to come for counselling. You can use them to motivate change in the *Inducement* phase of counselling. Who wants these things in their lives?

1) Conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Update 1995, unless otherwise indicated.

*A hot-tempered man stirs up strife ... Prov 15:18*

2) Foolish behaviour.

*A quick tempered man acts foolishly ... Prov 14:17*

Prov 25:28. *Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit.*

3) Broken relationships.

*A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city ... Prov 18:19*

Almost all marriage and family counselling will require you to address the subject of anger because anger breaks relationships.

4) More anger.

*A man of great anger will bear the penalty, for if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again. Prov 19:19*

Principle: Anger produces anger.

- Anger is habit forming for the person who expresses it frequently. The more you get angry, the more you get angry.

Note:

Some people think that only anger expressed at people is sin—anger at inanimate objects such as a broken power tool or a flopped cake is not. Anger, however, is habit forming, and should be abandoned whether it is against people or things.

- Anger also produces anger because your anger tempts other people's anger.

A note on the psychological practice of *catharsis*:

Psychology often promotes *catharsis* as a solution for anger.

*catharsis*: from the Greek word for *cleansing*

In catharsis, a person is told to "cleanse" himself of anger by punching, kicking, yelling, and even screaming obscenities at an object such as a pillow, imagining it to be the person who has offended him.

The assumption behind catharsis is that the outburst will exhaust the person's stored up anger. Pour water out of a glass, and the glass will be empty. Pour anger out of your heart, and your heart will be empty. Right?

Three reasons the concept of *catharsis* is unbiblical:

- i. An outburst of anger is sin even if directed at a pillow.
- ii. God's command is to "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, [and] forgiving each other" (Eph 4:32). Raging at someone *in absentia* can hardly be called tender-hearted and forgiving.
- iii. Catharsis completely overlooks the habit-forming nature of sin.

#### 5) Other sins.

*A hot-tempered man abounds in transgression. Prov 29:22*

Anger is never a lonely sin: hot-tempered people *abound* in transgression: hurtful words, irate shouting, lies, false accusations, gossip, slander, bitterness, and so on.

#### 6) Satanic opportunity.

*Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. Eph 4:26-27*

Retained anger gives Satan a "place" or a platform from which to divide churches, families, and other relationships. In short, anger is Satan's playground. That's motivation to overcome anger.

#### 7) Divine dishonour.

Counselees must be motivated to forsake their anger, not merely to escape the painful consequences of anger, but also because anger is sin and must be stopped if God is to be glorified.

### **Three Keys to Overcoming Anger:**

### First Key: Divine resources

Anger is so habit-forming that it can easily become a life-dominating sin. People do it without thinking. It takes the divine resources of the transforming power of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit to overcome this insidious sin.

1. The transforming power of Christ:

2 Cor 5:17

2. The power of the indwelling Spirit:

Gal 5:16      Gal 5:22-23

### Second Key: Accepting responsibility

Most people hold a *victim* view of their anger:

Things outside the angry person are blamed for his outbursts or bitterness.

The victim blames:

God:                    *That's just the way I am. I have red hair. I'm German, after all—God made me this way, so I can't help but become angry.*

other people:        *If he hadn't been so rude, I wouldn't have gotten angry.*

circumstances:     *The kids have been terrible today.*

The biblical view—*personal responsibility*:

Discovering and facing up to the true source of anger is one of the keys to overcoming anger. We aren't *forced* to become angry; we *choose* to become angry.

Prov 29:11. *The fool always sends out his spirit.* (literal translation)

In biblical parlance, you don't *lose your temper*, you *send out your spirit*. That's active responsibility.

James 1:14. *Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lusts.*

We get angry because we have strong desires; when they are not met, we want revenge. Anger is a choice.

Objection:

*But I can't control my anger. It just bursts out of me. I don't choose it; it just happens.*

For some counselees, anger becomes such a habit that they no longer consciously choose to become angry. They have become angry so often, it becomes an automatic, knee-jerk response. In the language of Romans 6, they have become *slaves* to sin.

Note:

The divine resources available in Christ mean that this slavery can be broken (and already is, in one sense, according to Romans 6).

### **Third Key: Replacement**

The *put off / be renewed in your thinking / put on* process of biblical change. Anger is overcome when it is replaced.

Eph 4:31-32. *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*

### **Counselling Anger—The Process:**

Three basic questions:

1. What is your problem?
2. What does *God* say about your problem?
3. What does God say *to do* about your problem?

#### ➤ **Question 1: What is your problem?**

Two things to look for as the counselee answers this question:

1. Most people will describe their anger from the perspective of victim theology.

*It's my personality.  
She makes me so angry.  
I've been under a lot of pressure lately.*

## 2. Look for patterns.

Biblical counsellors are always looking for patterns of sinful thinking and acting, not merely individual incidents.

- Patterns indicate the main issues to be dealt with.
- Identifying patterns simplifies the counselling process significantly. Now you only have to deal with *three patterns* not *thirty distinct incidents*.

Key questions to ask under *What is your problem?*:

- When do you most often become angry?
- With whom?
- In what situations?
- How do you typically express your anger?

### ➤ **Question 2: What does God say about your problem?**

Here the counsellor begins to introduce biblical thinking about the sin of anger, preparing the counselee to choose biblical change.

Two steps to adopting God's perspective on anger:

- Step 1: Move from victim theology to *I'm responsible*.  
 Step 2: Identify the counselee's anger-sins by their biblical names (so that they can be replaced by their biblical opposite).

### **Step 1: Move their thinking from victim to responsible.**

Jay Adams:

*The passive, victim language that, as sinners, we have developed to excuse ourselves, must frequently be challenged. (The Case of the Hopeless Marriage, 31)*

Two key verses on responsibility:

James 1:14

James 4:1

We get angry because we want something or because some pleasure we desire has been denied.

## Step 2: Identify anger-sins by their biblical names.

Lou Priolo:

*A problem cannot be solved biblically until it is diagnosed using biblical terminology. (The Heart of Anger, 102)*

In fact, it is basically impossible to make progress with a counselee until he is willing to acknowledge and confess his sin using biblical terminology.

Key biblical names for anger:

*Impatience* (1 Thess 5:14-15):

Impatience is mental, verbal, or non-verbal revenge, repayment, or *retaliation*. It is repaying the "evil" of inconvenience with mental complaining, a sharp word, rolling the eyes, or a glare of disgust.

*Bitterness* (Eph 4:31; Eph 4:26-27; Heb 12:15):

Eph 4:31. The Greek word *pikria* referred to the taste left in your mouth by stomach bile after you throw up. *Pikria* came to be used of *bitterness*—having a bad taste in your mouth toward someone.

Bitterness is *retained anger*. It broods over the memory of past offences, real or imagined. Rather than overlook a transgression, it nurses hurts, constantly replaying them in the mind.

The destructive nature of bitterness:

Eph 4:26-27    Heb 12:15

Bitterness is a private sin with *public* effects. It is one of Satan's favourite tools for destroying unity in churches, families, and other relationships.

*Wrath and Anger* (Eph 4:31):

These biblical words covered everything from animosity to fury, from exasperation to rage.

*Clamour* (Eph 4:31):

Clamour referred to the raised voices and boisterous shouting of an angry, back-and-forth argument. God says that raised-voice arguing is an anger-sin that must be put off.

*Slander or evil speaking* (Eph 4:31):

Any hurtful, attacking words, including untrue accusations, angry insults, mocking, and name-calling.

*Malice* (Eph 4:31):

Malice referred to a desire to cause hurt to another person. Angry malice longs to make the other person look foolish or to crush him or her emotionally, imagining ways to do this.

Summary:

Having put God's perspective on anger in front of the counselee in regard to responsibility and biblical terminology, now you can start to implement change.

➤ **Question 3: What does God say to do about your problem?**

The change God requires can be summed up in one word: *replacement*.

Romans 12:21. *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Three steps the counselee must take to overcome anger:

- Step 1: Repent.
- Step 2: Identify.
- Step 3: Stop.
- Step 4: Replace.

**Step 1: Repent.**

1. Confession:

1 John 1:9 The counselee must agree with God that what he thought, did, or said was sin.

2. Seeking forgiveness:

This includes the counselee asking both God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of other people he has been angry against.

## Step 2: Identify.

The counselor must identify three things: the counselee's typical expressions of anger, his motives, and his *I deserve* thinking.

### 1) Identify typical external or internal expressions of anger.

This becomes important when you teach the counselee to notice the early warning signs of his anger so he can stop himself before he launches into a habitual wrathful or bitter response.

### 2) Identify motives.

*How is the counselee using his anger? or What is his goal when he expresses anger?*

Typical answers:

#### 1. Manipulation.

This person uses anger as a means of controlling others because he knows that people fear his outbursts. *When I get angry, people back off and give me what I want.*

#### 2. Revenge.

*I deserve! or I have the right!* thinking. *My rights were violated, and I want to punish you for it.*

### 3) Identify *I deserve!* thinking.

Anger is usually revenge for "violated" rights.

When someone believes his *right* to control his schedule, personal belongings, or the cleanness of her kitchen floor has been violated, he or she strikes back with anger.

Four biblical illustrations of *I have the right!* thinking:

- Luke 15:25-29
- Genesis 4:3-6
- 1 Sam 17:26-29
- Numbers 22:27

Principle:

To overcome anger, the *I deserve!* thinking must change (*be renewed in the spirit of your mind*).

To uncover the *I deserve!* thinking, you must ask the counselee:

- *What were you thinking when you got angry?*
- *What did you want?*

Key verse:

James 4:1 *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?*

People get angry because they want something. To address the heart, you must discover what your counselee wanted so badly that he was willing to sin to get it or to sin because he didn't get it.

Summary:

To overcome anger the counselee must renew his thinking by identifying the proud, *I deserve!* attitudes that are the source of his anger.

### **Step 3: Stop anger responses.**

Having identified the counselee's heart motivations for his anger, next, he must learn to choose to stop his anger responses when he is tempted to explode with anger or to nurture the slow burn of bitterness.

Use anger's early warning signs:

Having identified his typical internal or external early warning signs (fists clenched, raised voice, red face, tight feeling in stomach, resentful thoughts, etc.), teach the counselee to look for those early warning signs, to send up a quick prayer, and to shut down his anger response before it happens.

The counselee must stop:

- verbal or non-verbal retaliation for inconvenience (impatience)
- brooding over past wrongs (bitterness)
- getting steamed up when his "rights" have been violated (anger/wrath)
- cranking up the volume when he disagrees with someone (clamour)
- insulting, hurtful words (evil speaking)
- wishing evil on another person or working for his hurt (malice)

Point:

There is no silver-bullet, godliness-in-a-pill solution for stopping anger. The counselee must learn to identify anger coming on each time it happens and choose to stop it by not responding in the way he normally would.

Divine resources for stopping anger:

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Gal 5:22-23)*

Human responsibility for stopping anger:

*... work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you ... (Phil 2:12-13)*

Encouragement:

No sin—including anger—is stronger than a God-assisted choice to do what is right.

#### **Step 4: Replace angry thoughts and actions with their godly opposites.**

Romans 12:21. *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

#### **Ten biblical replacements of anger:**

##### 1. Kindness.

Eph. 4:32

Kindness is doing nice, helpful, or loving things for another person, even when he *doesn't deserve it*, even if he has been ungrateful and evil.

God's example:

*Luke 6:35. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.*

##### 2. Tender-heartedness.

Eph 4:32

In Matthew 9:36, this word was used to describe Jesus' attitude toward the sinful nation of Israel.

When Jesus saw the sin of Israel—the sin that He would personally carry on the cross—He didn't say, "How could you do this to Me? I'm going to get even." Instead, Matthew says He "felt compassion for them."

Principle:

Compassion or tender-heartedness views another person's sin as something to be forgiven, not as an opportunity for anger.

Example:

The prodigal's father (Luke 15:20)

### 3. Forgiveness.

Eph 4:32

Forgiveness includes wiping away the person's offence and putting it out of your mind rather than continually brooding over it.

### 4. Patience.

Patience replaces the sin of retaliating for inconvenience.

1 Thess 5:15                  Col 3:12-13

### 5. Humility.

Humility replaces *I deserve!* and *I have the right!* thinking.

Col 3:12                  Rom 12:3

### 6. Love.

1 Cor 13:4-5

Love refuses to be provoked to anger and replaces bitterness, refusing to keep track of failures or offences.

## 7. Self-control.

Prov 16:32    Prov 29:11    Gal 5:22-23

## 8. Momentary, godly silence.

Prov 15:28    James 1:19-20

## 9. Gentle words.

Prov 15:1

## 10. Refusal to take revenge.

Prov 20:22

Vengeance is the business of a just God, not unjust men.

## Summary:

Those ten replacements will allow your counselee to move from angry to slow-to-anger, self-controlled, kind, and patient.

**Implementation**

Anger is a difficult sin to overcome. The following are five practical ways that you can help a struggling counselee gain control over his anger.

**Five helps for implementation:**

## 1. Prayer.

Prayer activates God's grace.

*Colossians 1:9-10. For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God ...*

## 2. Scripture memory.

Memorise key verses on anger, its tragic results, and its godly replacements. The Spirit can bring these verses to mind at key moments, helping the person avoid anger or to ask forgiveness quickly if he falters.

Proverbs on anger:

14:17, 14:29, 15:1, 15:18, 16:32, 17:14, 17:27, 19:11, 19:19, 20:22, 21:23, 22:24-25, 25:28, 26:4, 26:20, 27:3, 29:11, 29:22

### 3. Scenarios.

Walk the person back through several of his recent anger incidents. As you evaluate his sinful responses, gently and patiently do the following:

- Show him how he responded wrongly, using biblical terminology to describe his words or actions.
- Expose his *I deserve!* thinking in each case.
- Point out the biblical replacements for his sin—how he could have responded instead.
- Teach him to attack the problem, not the person.

This training *outside of* the moment of anger helps the counselee learn how to act rightly *in* the moment of anger.

### 4. Encourage him to avoid angry people or anger-glorifying materials.

Prov 22:24-25. *Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man, or you will learn his ways and find a snare for yourself.*

This includes movies, tv shows, or books that regularly portray anger: *Bad company corrupts good morals* (1 Cor 15:33).

### 5. Journaling.

Have the counselee write down his anger sins each day. Keeping an anger journal has a number of benefits, primarily allowing the counselee *to counsel himself*.

Benefits of journaling:

- Journaling allows the counselee to identify the patterns of his anger and to put extra effort into not sending out his spirit in situations where he frequently stumbles.

- Journaling allows the counselee to walk back through his anger failures, reviewing how he could have thought and responded differently.

The benefit of catching your anger response early:

*Many counsees think of change only in terms of changing the full-blown problem. When they think that way, they become discouraged. A woman may picture herself virtually out of control, yelling and screaming at her children. However, that point was reached not all at once; it came in stages. While even at its most spectacular point it is possible to get control over anger, it is much easier to break the earliest link in the chain of events (or steps) that led to this point. (Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselors Manual*, 195-197)*

- Journaling allows the counselee to scout his anger, changing things in his life that give him unnecessary opportunity to become angry.

Example:

If a father discovers that he is often angry when his family is late for church, he can start to help his wife get the children ready, rather than expecting her to do it all herself.

Helping his wife will remove an unnecessary opportunity for anger.

- Journaling allows the counselee to be encouraged by the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in his life as the number and frequency of his anger incidents gradually diminish.

(For a good discussion of journaling, see Lou Priolo, *The Heart of Anger*, 80-85)

Resources:

*The Heart of Anger*, Lou Priolo

*Uprooting Anger*, Robert Jones

*The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande

The Conflict Resolution notes in Marriage Counselling (2)

*Overcoming Anger*, Joel James (available for free download on the Grace Fellowship website)

## Appendix A: A note on righteous anger

Righteous anger exists. God is angry with sinners, but does not sin (Rom 1:18; Num 11:1; Mark 3:1-5.). This divine, righteous anger does have a parallel in our human indignation at injustice, crime, atrocities, and evil—a momentary, internal indignation over sin and its effects.

In people, righteous anger has five characteristics:

1. It is momentary.
2. It is not expressed in a dramatic, external fashion.
3. It is over sin and its effects.
4. It is concerned with God's glory, not men's.
5. It is willing to trust God as Judge (Prov 20:22; Ecc 12:14; 1 Pet 2:23).

What about Ephesians 4:26-27?

Ephesians 4:26 (*Be angry, and yet do not sin*) seems to indicate that there is a kind of human anger that is not sin. However, this is the only text in the Bible that speaks favourably of human anger, and should not be read as an encouragement to be angry.

In fact, Paul rejected bitterness, wrath, anger, and clamour a few verses later in Ephesians 4:32. That indicates we need to have great caution in applying the words *Be angry* in Ephesians 4:26.

Point:

Even righteous anger can be dangerous.

Three reasons righteous anger can be dangerous.

1. Righteous anger usually crosses the line into unrighteous anger very quickly.

Example:

When my children disobey, I might claim that I'm righteously angry. Perhaps for a second I am. However, most of the time my anger is not righteous indignation over the fact that *God's* standards were violated. It usually starts as or turns immediately into unrighteous anger because *my* convenience, comfort, or control was violated.

*James 1:20. The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*

2. Righteous anger externally or dramatically displayed is a bad testimony.

Illustration:

Suppose a driver skips a robot and thumps into the side of your car. Do you think your so-called righteous anger of yelling at him for his reckless driving is a good Christian testimony?

3. Anger is habit forming; therefore, righteous anger, when cultivated, can easily spill over into unrighteous anger.

*Prov 19:19. A man of great anger will bear the penalty, for if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again.*

#### Summary:

Don't allow a counselee to get caught in the trap of excusing his outbursts of anger or in-bursts of bitterness as "righteous" anger. Switching labels on a bottle of poison doesn't make the contents any less deadly.

If you do have a momentary flash of internal indignation over sin and its effects, you can know that you have not sinned. But don't allow yourself or your counselees to defend sinful anger by labelling it righteous. God is not fond of people who "call evil good, and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20).