

Inside Out

Anger

John 2:13–17 (NRSV)

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. **15** Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. **16** He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” **17** His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Introduction. Have you experienced any irritation or anger in the past 6 months?

- Perhaps some of you have been angry when you have encountered regulations to wear a mask. Perhaps others of you have been angry when you were in public and saw others were not wearing a mask.
- Perhaps some of you have been irritated by your church not having regular in-person worship. Perhaps others of you have been upset when you have passed a church on Sunday and the parking lot is full.
- Perhaps some of you have been furious at the harm and damage you have seen broadcast that have taken place during the riots. Perhaps others of you have grown angry at the ongoing existence of systemic racism.
- Perhaps you have been angered by the mixed messages that have been communicated politically and in the media regarding the pandemic.
- Perhaps you have been upset by politicians saying one thing and practicing another during this season.
- Well, I have a huge reason to be angry – I have not gotten to see my new granddaughter face-to-face and to hold her.

In the survey we conducted earlier this summer to gage how you are doing and to help in determining how to minister as a church, 14% they had experiences increased frustration/irritation and 7% said they had experienced increased anger. So 21% of us have had increased anger during the past 6 months. I suspect that number is low.

Anger is a universal emotion. All of us experience anger. There is no immunization for it. Anger happens whether we are experiencing a pandemic, protests and riots, a presidential campaign, dealing with a child who will not comply or trying to make an important decision in a church.

Recently I listened to the audiobook, *Midnight at Chernobyl*, which tells the story of the nuclear disaster that took place in the Soviet Union in 1986. I learned that while nuclear energy can be a great resource for producing electricity, it also possesses some huge potential dangers that can do great harm. At Chernobyl, there was a great rush to put several reactors on line, short-cuts were taken, inferior products were used and safety protocols were often ignored. These led to a catastrophic failure of one of the nuclear reactors that killed thousands of people and rendered a 25-mile perimeter of land uninhabitable. Nuclear energy can be used for great good but can do great harm. It must be handled with great care.

Anger is for us the nuclear emotion. It has the potential for great good but can also do great harm. Unless it is handled with care, disaster is likely to follow in its wake. Anger led Herod to kill all the male babies under two in Jerusalem and fuels the fire in the belly of terrorists who kill innocent people at a concert. Anger can turn any of us into bitter people who have no joy. Yet anger can move us to a passion to address important matters for God's sake. The fire in our belly that comes from anger can fuel passion that enables us to reach our highest goals.

So how we handle our anger and what we do out of our anger is so very important.

Jesus got angry.

Several years ago in a conversation about anger with a friend and colleague in ministry, he asserted that anger was wrong and should in all instances be avoided. While I knew there were several warnings in scripture about anger, I also knew there are things said of anger that did not condemn it. So I disagreed with my friend and we both got angry – no, not really.

In Jesus we see God becoming human. Jesus lived human life to its fullest and gave an example of how to live the best life. He experienced all the same type of stuff we experience but was able to do so well (Hebrews 4:15). What might surprise some about his life is he did experience the nuclear emotion of anger.

There are three stories in the gospels that give us a glimpse of Jesus being angry.

- On one occasion while Jesus was attending synagogue (Jewish church), a man with a withered hand was present. Many in the congregation were waiting to see if the Healer would heal on the Sabbath so they could accuse Jesus. They were not concerned about the man. Jesus became angry at their hardness of heart. He healed the man. (Mark 3:5)
- On another occasion, parents had brought their small children for Jesus to bless. The disciples had blocked the way for this to happen. When Jesus learned about it, he was irritated. He had the children brought to himself.
- Then we have this story of Jesus clearing the temple of the merchants and money changers. It is a rather surprising picture to see Jesus brandishing a whip and driving the animals out of the temple courtyard and over turning tables of the money changers. It is not the same picture of Jesus with children on sitting on his lap and around him. But it is the same Jesus. Let's dive a little deeper into this third story. The whole picture seems a little strange for most of us but it was not so strange for those living in Jesus' day. On special holidays such as

Passover, Jewish pilgrims would return to Jerusalem to celebrate. Because Jews were dispersed throughout the nations, they would have to travel great distances to return.

When they came to the temple at Passover, they had two or three practices they intended to do. One they needed to pay the “temple tax” which by Jewish law required Jewish money. They would need to exchange their money for the appropriate currency. (If you bring pesos for your offering, it needs to be converted for Sarah to deposit it.) Unfortunately, inside the temple courts the rates were high. (Like buying a hotdog at Truist Park.)

Many of the pilgrims wanted to make a thanksgiving offering to God. Under their religious practice this involved an animal sacrifice. Because it was impracticable for them to transport their own animals, they would purchase them when they came to the temple. Additionally, they would need to purchase a lamb for the Passover meal. To fill these needs, animals were sold in the temple.

So when Jesus came into the temple court, what he saw disturbed him. It looked like Chattanooga Market rather than a place set aside for worship and prayer. He did not hear the voices of pilgrims singing the songs of assent but of people haggling over a price. He did not see people turning their hearts to God in prayer but people turning a profit. What God had intended to happen in a place set aside for heaven to touch earth had been flipped on its head. This is what irritated and upset Jesus.

Jesus, like us, knew the emotion of anger. He felt that rising of irritation within him. Like us he was faced with what he would do with his anger. He chose to use it for a higher purpose – to point to the real purpose of the temple and worship.

Steps for healthy responses with anger.

I want to suggest some responses we can have when we become angry that may help us manage this emotional experience.

Admit I am angry. The starting point for us is a realization that we are experience irritation and anger. It is truly challenging to deal with anger in healthy ways and make our anger constructive if we fail to recognize we are angry.

Like all of you, I get angry from time to time. For me, anger presents itself through some common physical manifestations. When I get angry, my face often grows red – and I have lots of face to turn red. The muscles in my body tighten and often I can feel it in my shoulders and neck. My heart beat often speeds up. (I imagine this is a “fight” reaction.) If I speak with I am angry, my voice (I have the gift and curse of a big voice) grows louder without me realizing it.

What are the signs for you that you are angry or getting angry?

Recognizing our anger can help us in a critical way in our interaction with others. By recognizing your anger, you can take steps to slow down the process. James wrote for us to be “*slow to anger*” (1:19). If you can slow down the anger and take a breath before reacting, then you will be in a better place. After all, most of our physical resources have been robbed from our brains in the heat of anger and we typically don’t think well.

Have you had this experience? You are reading your email and you come across something that in the initial reading ticks you off. As you read it, you feel the sap of anger rising within you. Have you ever responded immediately to such an email? I have found that if I somehow can find the discipline to slow down, set the email aside for a period of time – an hour or a day – then come back and read it again, I find that usually it did not say what I thought in the initial reading. At that point I can better react.

Why am I angry? This is an important question to ask when we recognize we are angry. Determining this will guide us in healthy responses to our anger.

Sometimes our anger arises out of corrupted places within us. If we can recognize this when it happens, it can be a great gift to help us grow and become more like Jesus by addressing our brokenness. But it is not easy to recognize this.

After Jesus had healed a person on the Sabbath, a Jewish leader grew outraged because he had healed on the Sabbath. We know that this anger was misguided. He should have rejoiced but he got angry. Sometimes I get angry because I want to protect my turf, because I want at that moment what I want, because I am stubborn, etc. You get my drift don't you?

It takes some hard looking at ourselves and our motivations to discern if our anger is from a corrupt place. But if we can discern this or it is revealed to us by God, then we can repent – we can make the turn to God, admit why we were angered and ask God to lead us to a healthy place.

Sometimes our anger springs from the right places within us. For example, we may become angry when a key godly value we hold is being treaded upon. This is what happened for Jesus at the temple. The temple was a house of prayer for all nations. What he saw happening there had thwarted its real purpose.

As a pastor, I hold a few key values that when I feel they are being minimized or threatened, it causes the sap to rise in me – Being a hospitable community, being a generous community, being a community that welcomes other regardless of their warts, being a community that loves and cares for each other. When conversation and making decisions tend to go against these values, I am prone to anger.

How can I channel my anger for good? When we realize our anger is motivated by the good reasons and motives, we need to ask this question. Here is a huge warning. Any of us can have good and godly reasons to be angry but can express our anger in ways that is demonic and deadly.

One of our greatest resources in exploring what to do is prayer – lay the matter before the Lord and ask for guidance. The reality is that some of the time, prayer is the only healthy thing we can do.

Out of humility and dependence upon the Lord, God can speak to us and guide us into actions that can make a difference. God can help us channel our anger into a resolve that lead toward kingdom goals. God can use our anger to give us clarity as we move in the direction that is good. In this process it is helpful to seek counsel from godly people and to search the Word.

From what I have suggested, you recognize that this involves time. But here is the key, we must not allow the anger merely to linger. Paul urged to “*not let the sun go down on our wrath.*” In other words, we work intentionally toward resolution. If it lingers long, it turns to bitterness and destroys us. We are robbed of our joy and peace.

If you breathe and are our mentally conscious, you will experience anger. You can be destroyed and harm others if you deal with its nuclear power wrongly. So I urge you to admit when you are angry, ask why am I angry and if the anger is “good” anger, explore how you can channel it in healthy ways.