

## **A Study of Anger (*ira*)**

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*Ephesians 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, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”*

### **Is *anger* always sinful?**

This is a hard question and there isn't consensus on the answer. Here are some points to consider:

- a) Anger is extremely difficult for sinners like us to master. Since it nearly always becomes *our* master, many church fathers counseled to avoid anger altogether.
- b) We should not equate God's "wrath" or "anger" in the Scriptures with man's anger. God's wrath is of an altogether different sort than our human wrath. His is always perfect and righteous. Ours is decidedly not.
- c) Anger may indeed rise from a good and virtuous desire for justice. However, if it is ever to be exercised righteously, it *must* be kept under love and reason and addressed only toward sin. Anger must never fall away from love of God and neighbor.

### **What are two dangers of anger?**

First, when anger is not dealt with rightly then we cannot pray or worship rightly. Anger distracts us from any true prayer. For this, Jesus is very clear in Matthew 5:22, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." Our Small Catechism has long instructed that you should not receive the Lord's Supper if you are angry with another.

Secondly, we cannot think rationally when anger is present. Every sinner who is angry justifies his anger. This is easy for us because our reason becomes absolutely blinded by anger. We will even use God's own word to justify our anger when we are not thinking clearly.<sup>i</sup>

### **Isn't anger simply an emotion?**

Peter Kreeft explains that anger has four levels:

1. The emotion itself (neither good nor evil).
2. The emotion rightly ordered by the will (good).
3. The emotion overstepping the bounds (evil).
4. The emotion of anger turned into hatred (evil).<sup>ii</sup>

This is why many Christians argue that anger isn't always sinful. If it is directed at the right things and in the right amount—then it may indeed be helpful. As stated above, however, it is seemingly impossible for us sinners to keep anger rightly ordered and directed. When anger is not controlled, we have the following three possibilities<sup>iii</sup>:

1. angry too quickly
  2. angry too much
  3. angry too long
- All of them are sinful.

**If anger can be righteous, who would be our example?**

Certainly Jesus is the perfect example of anger. He is angry at the sin of the moneychangers in the temple and angry at the hatred and hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Yet He always desires the salvation of every sinner.

Outside of Christ, another example of anger ordered rightly would be Martin Luther King, Jr. Certainly he was not perfect in anger, yet he gave an overall example of anger rightly directed and ordered.

**Even with good examples of anger, how should Christians treat it?**

We should avoid it as God's Word directs us. We should ask ourselves, "What am I angry at and why?" You may need to keep a journal of your anger so that you can ask the question. Often we will find we have no legitimate reason for our anger or that we are misdirecting it. We will also find that our anger is completely selfish and motivated by other vices such as greed or envy.<sup>iv</sup>

Offshoots of our anger will be such things as magnifying the offense, demeaning the offender, plotting revenge, fantasizing about retaliation, insulting and gossiping, becoming violent, clamoring (shouting or yelling), and cursing.

**What is God's answer to anger?**

All of the injustice of the world is answered in the cross of Jesus Christ. Therefore, God's answer to our anger and wrath is found in forgiveness of our sin and forgiveness of the sins of others. It is also found in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion where the cross of Jesus Christ is delivered to us. We should dissolve our anger in the blood of Jesus Christ who suffered the ultimate injustice for all of us.

**What's the opposite virtue of anger?**

Patience. This is different from suppressing anger (see next question). Patience enlarges the heart so that wrath dissipates and is dispelled. To help with patience we may consider the following<sup>v</sup>:

1. Practice diffusing anger by remembering our own past faults, remembering our past love for our neighbor, singing Psalms, and by giving gifts to others.
2. Prepare for future anger by learning our bad habits and our triggers and preparing to respond differently than we normally would.
3. Remember that we are members of another world and that God makes all things right. This world and the injustices here are only temporary.

**Should you vent anger or suppress it?**

Neither<sup>vi</sup>. Modern psychology has claimed that venting your anger is the only acceptable way of dealing with it. However, the early monks knew that anger and hatred only increase when they are vented. They do not dissipate. On the other side, suppressing anger with feigned patience or spiteful silence is equally damning and does not love our neighbor as ourselves.

The correct response to anger is to put it away in Christ. Every morning we awake in our Baptism to put off the old sinful flesh and put on Christ. Christ enlarges our hearts so that anger and hatred cannot fill it but are dissolved away in His love.

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<sup>i</sup> Okholm, Dennis. *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*. Brazos, 2014. p. 99.

<sup>ii</sup> Kreeft, Peter. *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion*. Ignatius Press, 1992, p. 138.

<sup>iii</sup> DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. Brazos, 2009, p. 124.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>v</sup> Okholm, *Dangerous Passions*. p. 109.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.