

Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger

BY RYAN WEST

A wide gap looms between knowing *that* we should eliminate inappropriate anger from our lives and knowing *how* to do so. The Christian tradition is rich with practical guidance for us, including the anger antidotes of watchfulness, practicing virtue, and prayer.

When Bob Roberts envisages two life trajectories for his fictional Molly – the irascible Molly who indulges her anger for twenty years and now gets mad about every slight that affects her directly, and the gentle Molly who brings her anger under control and bears the fruit of the Holy Spirit – we root for the gentle one and rejoice when he chooses to make her “real.” We do not wish anyone – ourselves, our family and friends, or even strangers – to descend into the miserable, loveless nightmare of wrath that he describes.¹ Yet, we live in what Henry Fairlie has rightly called “an age of Wrath,” and many of us are children of our age.² Molly had the good fortune of being transformed ever so quickly from wrathful to virtuous by authorial fiat. Our transformation, however, if it is to happen at all, will surely be more difficult and drawn out.

The Apostle Paul instructs believers to “get rid” of anger (Colossians 3:8) and to “put away...all bitterness and wrath and anger” (Ephesians 4:31). While many Christians (rightly, in my view) allow for the possibility of “righteous” anger, these Pauline warnings are indicative of a more pervasive theme in Scripture: that much anger is not righteous and must be “gotten rid of,” and we have an active role to play in getting rid of it. There is a gap,

though, between knowing *that* we should eliminate inappropriate anger and knowing *how* to do so. Many frustrated souls call this gap home. My aim is to help fill this gap by offering some practical guidance to those who want to heed Paul's anger-ridding exhortation.

My advice is come by honestly: my name is Ryan, and I am a recovering angry dad. Allow me to explain.

My children are among the greatest joys in my life. They also know how to push my buttons. There was a time when I saw my anger over my children's misdeeds as not only justified but morally necessary – it is my job as a parent to train my children in goodness, after all, and my anger communicates to them the nastiness of their wrongdoings. At some point, though, my perspective began to shift. Perhaps it was when I noticed a pattern developing: Child disobeys, Daddy gets angry, Daddy cools off, Daddy realizes Child's "disobedience" was less a flagrant violation of filial piety and more an instance of (somewhat) innocent playfulness, Daddy apologizes for getting so upset. The pattern has recurred more often than I would like to admit. (Kids are rambunctious, you know, and I am rather hard-headed.) It dawned on me that I was starting to look like irascible Molly: the default mode of my gestalt switch was rusting in the anger position rather than the love position. I was more inclined to see my children's blameworthiness and unattractiveness and to wish them to be hurt, than to notice their loveliness and goodness and to wish them to be happy. Something had to change. I needed a plan.

As it happens, the most helpful tool for developing my anger attack plan was coming to understand the nature of anger. Anger is a way of "seeing" that presents the world to us in terms of blameworthy offense, presents us to ourselves as being in a moral position to judge, and breeds in us a desire for "pay back." Thus, getting rid of inappropriate anger – anger that is either misdirected, too quick to flare up, blazing too hot, or too slow to burn out – will involve (among other things) reshaping one's heart in such a way that one is not so apt to see the world in anger's terms. The Christian tradition – especially the seven deadly sins tradition – is rich with practical guidance for retraining our ethical vision in this way. Here I draw on that tradition, adapting (somewhat loosely) some of the anger antidotes proposed by Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century.³ I focus on three potential remedies – watchfulness, practicing virtue, and prayer – highlighting how these cures can help redirect and retrain the "eyes of our hearts."

WATCHFULNESS

The sort of watchfulness I have in mind has two aspects: a kind of self-reconnaissance and then a tactical implementation of the "intel" that one gathers. In any battle, combatants must "know the enemy." In the battle for our character, this military maxim partially merges with the

Socratic dictum, “Know thyself,” for we are at war not only with “the world” and “the devil,” but also with our (old) self. Thus, Rebecca DeYoung is wise to suggest that, “if we find ourselves habitually wrathful, the first question to ask is what we are really getting angry about and why.”⁴ The Christian tradition has identified a number of common sources of inappropriate anger, including, but not limited to, our over-attachment to worldly goods, unrealistic expectations of the people in our lives, an inflated sense of our own importance, and a misinformed or misdirected passion for justice. Familiarity with these patterns of the fallen heart is a helpful first step toward knowing ourselves. But it is not enough. We must also appreciate which of these ailments beset *us*. That is, my knowledge must not simply be of the *human* condition, but of *my* condition. And my knowledge cannot simply be a matter of “knowing the facts” about myself, but must include “heart knowledge,” a measure of motivating insight about my inner life that includes repentance and desire to change. This can be a tall order, given the relative opacity of our hearts (see Jeremiah 17:9). But we are not without resources.

To help discern both the roots and the (in)appropriateness of one’s anger, DeYoung recommends keeping an anger journal. For one week, be “on the watch”: record your episodes of anger, briefly noting the cause and rating the intensity on a five-point scale. Then put the journal away for a week. When you return to the journal, duly cooled, ask yourself: Was my anger justified? Too quick? Too intense? Too long-lasting? Did I express it well? In the heat of the

moment, it is easy to justify our anger. Indeed, anger tends to distort our perception, typically magnifying the putative offense, causing it to loom large in our moral vision. Anger is, in this way, self-deceptively self-justifying. Practices like this one give us distance and perspective with which to assess ourselves. Moreover, the insights gleaned from this kind of watchful self-examination—particularly if done

prayerfully, in conversation with trusted loved ones, and leaning heavily on God’s Spirit—can equip us to be more effectively “on the watch” in the future. Here we come to the second aspect of watchfulness mentioned above, the tactical implementation of self-intel.

As we come to understand ourselves and our ire, we can learn to recognize internal and external cues of impending anger and act preemptively

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to avoid it. The sort of ongoing watchfulness I have in mind is akin to defensive driving. Experienced drivers appreciate the devastating consequences of inadequate caution, and more or less automatically monitor for potential hazards. A ball rolls into the street, and we scan for a ball-chasing child; an overgrown tree blocks our view of an intersection, and we check a few extra times for oncoming traffic; and so on. Analogously, the watchful person working on her anger will appreciate her potential hazards and will monitor for cues that anger may be just around the corner, so to speak.

An example may help. Consider Rodney, a repentant road rager. Through self-examination, Rodney has come to appreciate that his heart is set on promoting what DeYoung calls the “Me-first agenda” — “I want what I want, and woe to anyone or anything that gets in my way.”⁵ He now sees that his single-minded pursuit of his way on the highway is the root of his tendency to be set off by any and every delay, even though (in his cooler moments) he knows, for instance, that having to wait through a rush hour traffic jam hardly qualifies as a blameworthy offense. When it becomes clear that his evening commute is going to take longer than he would like, then, Watchful Rodney may say to himself, “Look out! You’re in danger of overreacting!” Having warned himself, he is better equipped to fight actively against his overreaction, perhaps by actively attending to how utterly unremarkable this delay is, or by reminding himself (possibly even aloud) that other people need to get home just as badly as he does. In these ways, Rodney actively disrupts his anger by catching it before it starts and reinterpreting his situation for himself in non-offense terms. At first, this self-monitoring will not be automatic. It will take time for the angry person to recognize what his hot spots are; and learning to take his anger cues *as cues to fight against anger*, rather than *as cues to become angry*, will presumably be a new cognitive activity that requires conscious effort. Eventually, though, after he gains enough experience, vigilant watchfulness will become as automatic as scanning for kids when a ball rolls in front of his car.

So, the watchful person appreciates her own propensity to anger, and is poised to notice cues of its imminent onset. But what, precisely, is she supposed to *do* to counteract it? Rodney gave us a hint of one strategy. Two other good options would be to *practice virtue* and to *pray*.

THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUE

When Paul urges believers to “get rid of anger,” he also instructs them to “clothe” themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgivingness, love, peace, and gratitude. These virtues are good in themselves — that is, we should seek them for their own sakes. But they are also instrumentally good: “putting them on” can serve as an instrument for “taking off” anger. For as we “practice” these virtues — and I intend a strong analogy with athletic or musical practice — we actively retrain our emotional perceptions of our situations. Each of the virtues the Apostle

commends can counteract anger in its own way, and the varieties of anger may call for different virtue practices. Space precludes a treatment of each, so let me emphasize one: gentleness. (I invite the reader to explore how practicing the other virtues could defuse anger, and what such practice might look like concretely. The “real” Molly is quite skilled in some these.)

The virtuously gentle (or meek) person is not anger-free; significant injustice draws her ire. But she is not angered by the trivial slights that provoke many of us to wrath, and the anger she does experience is appropriately tempered in duration and intensity. As such, the gentle are characteristically tender and calm, avoiding harshness and severity in favor of mildness. Not so the angry. The angry parent—myself included—is inclined toward manifestly un-gentle behavior: flushed face, bulging eyes, raised voice, firm grip, and aggressive movement. Practicing gentleness involves intentionally avoiding these outward manifestations of anger, and replacing them with manifestations of gentleness. This can be very difficult. But the effort pays dividends.⁶ Here is how it can work.

My son is very good at whining, pouting, fussing, and just about every other tantrum-trick known to children. It is very natural for me to react to his tantrums with tantrums of my own. But I have come to appreciate this about myself, and so am “on the watch” and ready to counteract my incipient anger through gentleness. When his tantrum starts, I follow my gentleness script. I lower myself to his height by squatting down, rather than towering over him (both literally and

“morally”). I intentionally use a calm voice, rather than my instinctive yell. I call him “my precious boy,” rather than using his first, *middle*, and *LAST* names. I tenderly put my arm around him, avoiding all aggression. My aim in these gentle practices is not simply to avoid *expressing* inappropriate anger. (It is possible, if one is sufficiently strong willed, to act gently while seething under the surface. This

should not be our ultimate goal, even if it may be a necessary waypoint.) Rather, my aim is to avoid *becoming* inappropriately angry at all. I still have a way to go in this, but I am pleased to report that it often works. One reason it works, I think, is that my gentle behavior provides me with an interpretation of the situation that is in deep tension with anger: when I observe myself acting gently, it is very hard—though, I

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admit, not impossible – to see my son as a blameworthy offender and myself as his victim. Another reason is that when I remain “cool,” I am better able to “see” the factors that should count against my anger – my son’s age, his tiredness, his hunger, his non-malevolent intent, and so on – factors to which my angry self is blind. This is especially so when the practice explicitly calls such mitigating factors to mind (“my precious boy”). Though enacting this script was quite difficult at first, by God’s grace I often do not even have to think about it anymore. In this way, the practice of gentleness has shaded toward genuine gentleness, and has made it easier for me to keep my gestalt switch in the love position: my precious boy does not look like an offender to me very often; he simply looks precious.

PRAYER

A third tactic in the battle against anger is prayer. Surely the chief reason is that prayer is an appeal for divine assistance, and without God we can do nothing. However, here I will focus on the direct effect prayer can have on us, in changing our “take” on a situation.

First, consider how on-the-spot prayer can change our perception. Praying can become automated in a positive way – not robotic and without meaning, but habitual and second nature. For instance, many Christians have developed the habit of saying the Jesus Prayer throughout the day: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The novice must focus on her praying if she wants to recite the prayer dozens or even hundreds of times in a day. The veteran, though, need not *endeavor* to pray the prayer; she simply *does* it, without “trying.” It is possible for such a prayer to be robotic, in the pejorative sense of the term. But it can also be deeply meaningful. Indeed, it can be deeply meaningful even when done somewhat robotically.

Other automated prayers – like the brief, condemnatory ones that might slip from our angry tongues when someone cuts us off in traffic – are not so nice. Still, such unsavory supplications are worth pondering. The person who has habituated herself to damning offenders has (unintentionally) attached a prayer to a cue: perceived offenses. I want to suggest that the person trying to put aside anger could redeem this mental mechanism. One way might be to adapt the Jesus Prayer as an automatic response to offense. When an anger cue is present, we might pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on *us sinners*,” including both ourselves and our offenders (whether actual or merely perceived) in our prayer. This is not only a good way to ask for God’s help and to heed Jesus’s exhortation to pray for our enemies, it is also a direct assault on our angry “take” on the situation. By praying that God might have mercy on the jerk that just cut me off, I counteract my desire that she be punished. In asking for mercy for myself, a sinner, I redirect my attention to my own liability to wrongdoing – perhaps the very same sort of wrongdoing I have just suffered – and so may be less tempted to take on the role of judge. By connecting myself to my offender –

"us sinners" – I begin the process of reconciliation, or preemptively avoid the break in relationship that comes with anger, by attending to our shared membership in the community of those for whom Christ died and who stand in need of God's forgiveness. In these and other ways, anger is undercut.

We can supplement such on-the-spot prayers, and the shifts in perspective they may precipitate or embody, with off-the-spot prayers. Here is an excerpt from one such prayer crafted by Mother Teresa:

Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and, whilst nursing them, minister unto you.

Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you, and say: "Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you."

Lord, give me this seeing faith, then my work will never be monotonous. I will ever find joy in humoring the fancies and gratifying the wishes of all poor sufferers.

O beloved sick, how doubly dear you are to me, when you personify Christ; and what a privilege is mine to be allowed to tend you.⁷

Though few of us share Mother Teresa's precise calling to minister to the sick, we interact daily

with other people – from impatient drivers to our children, from over-demanding bosses to our spouses – who sometimes fall under the descriptions "the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable." I fully admit, it can be very hard for me to see my Terrible Two as a disguise worn by Christ, or the third diaper change in one night as a sweet opportunity to serve the Risen Lord. It is far more natural for me to regard my fussy son as an offender, and his dirty diapers as irritating interruptions. But both aspects of my situation admit of reconstrual. C. S. Lewis puts it well:

Prayer is a key tactic in battling anger. The chief reason is that prayer is an appeal for divine assistance, and without God we can do nothing. But here I focus on the direct effect prayer has on us, in changing our "take" on a situation.

The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's 'own,' or 'real' life. The truth is of

course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life – the life God is sending one day by day; what one calls one's 'real life' is a phantom of one's own imagination. This at least is what I see at moments of insight: but it's hard to remember it all the time.⁸

One way we could remember this insight more often, and thereby regard the unpleasant things in our lives, would be to pray Mother Teresa's prayer (or a version of it adapted to our own station in life) with some regularity. (Her prayer is designated for *daily* use in the Missionaries of Charity Children's Home.⁹) Doing so not only enlists God's help, but also provides us with an alternative set of interpretive categories and primes us to apply them. In a sense, as we speak to God, we say to ourselves: "Put away your offense lenses, and stop thinking about punishment. Christ is before you; look for him; serve him. This is your real life; and this is life indeed." To the extent we can make headway here, it will be anger's undoing.

CONCLUSION

I have sketched an anger-ridding plan, but let me close with two words of caution. First, dealing with anger is rather person-specific. (Remember, we are responding not just to the generic human condition, but to our own.) In presenting the foregoing anger remedies, my examples have largely been drawn from my own experience. While I have tried to use widely applicable examples, it may be that my experience is unhelpfully narrow. Thus, others will likely need to modify my examples, or even devise wholly different tactics of their own. I hope, though, that my examples, and the more general strategy outlined here, provide enough of a sense of how to proceed that the reader can develop and implement her own anger attack plan.

My second word of caution is this: be patient with yourself. Coming to terms with our anger is difficult; figuring out how to fight against it takes time, and successfully retraining our habits of construal and desire requires much more time. We should not expect to turn into paragons of love or gentleness or any of the other virtues overnight. In other words, we need to learn to practice patience with regard to our own progress in spiritual development. We should strive to appreciate God's patience toward us and to emulate his attitude. Toward this end we would do well to pray another portion of Mother Teresa's prayer. In these concluding petitions she once again gives us words that address not only God, but also our own hearts:

And O God, while you are Jesus, my patient, deign also to be to me a patient Jesus, bearing with my faults, looking only to my intention, which is to love and serve you in the person of each of your sick.

Lord, increase my faith, bless my efforts and work, now and forevermore. Amen.¹⁰

NOTES

1 I borrow the character “Molly” from Robert C. Roberts, “Anger in the Christian Life,” *Anger, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 53 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 11-20, and introduce a few of my own to illustrate the vice of anger and its correction.

2 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 90.

3 In *Four Faces of Anger: Seneca, Evagrius Ponticus, Cassian, and Augustine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), Gertrude Gillette discusses Evagrius’s remedies for anger under six headings: discernment of thoughts, reconciliation, virtue, prayer, asceticism, and gentleness.

4 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 123.

5 *Ibid.*, 122.

6 Evagrius commends gentleness as the most important cure for anger (see Gillette, *Four Faces of Anger*, chapter 2). His judgment coheres with my experience: practicing gentleness has been the most helpful tactic in my effort to get rid of inappropriate child-directed anger.

7 This prayer, “Jesus My Patient,” is quoted in Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986 [1971]), 74–75.

8 C. S. Lewis, *The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 1914-1963*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 499.

9 Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God*, 74.

10 *Ibid.*, 75.

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