



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Anger in the Christian Life
(*Anger*, pp. 11-20)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Artful Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 81-88)
- 📖 Bringing Anger into the Light
(*Anger*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Anger in the Christian Life

Anger expresses a sense of justice and of being in the presence of responsible agents. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle Paul notes, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.

Prayer

First we pray for those we know who endure abuses, who are mistreated, and who need an advocate stirred by righteous anger. (*Members offer silent petitions.*)

For these we pray: **Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

We pray for those we know who inflict injury on others by neglect, who abuse their power, and who need correction, repentance, and forgiveness. (*Members offer silent petitions.*)

For these we pray: **Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

We pray for our own need for discernment about when to be angry, for a patient and forgiving spirit, for openness to correction, and for forgiveness for injustices done and injuries permitted. (*Members offer silent confessions.*)

For ourselves we pray: **Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:21-5:2

Reflection

Among the things that the Apostle Paul lists as contrary to the new life of the Christian are “bitterness and wrath and anger,” along with the unsavory company they keep: “wrangling and slander, together with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31; cf. Colossians 3:8). These belong to the old self and need to be “stripped off.” “In their place we are to clothe ourselves with such things as love and peace,” Bob Roberts writes. “Since the Apostle allows that proper anger in small quantities can be good, perhaps he is speaking here not of all *instances* of anger but rather of the *vice* of irascibility – of being an angry sort of person.”

Roberts identifies four defining features of the emotion of anger: we cast blame on someone (the offender), want that person to be hurt, see the person as unattractive, and see ourselves as in a position to judge. Therefore, he explains, “If anger is ever to be right and fitting, two things must be true: first, that people are sometimes blameworthy, and their blameworthiness makes them unattractive and makes them deserve to be hurt; second, that somebody is in a position to judge. If this sounds harsh, remember that there are degrees of blameworthiness and degrees of anger: someone can be just a little bit unattractive, and for just a moment and in a particular context, and one can deserve to be hurt just a little bit. If anger is to be right and fitting, it needs not only to be in response to someone who is actually blameworthy and unattractive and who deserves to be hurt, but also to be limited to a degree of intensity that matches the case.”

Instances of righteous anger – that is, when we feel angry at the right time, for the right reason, and to the right degree – are signs of emotional health. They reveal that we care properly about what is valuable in ourselves, other people, the creation, and God. And such feelings signal offenders that they have harmed or failed to respect a person or thing of significant value.



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Yet episodes of anger can go badly wrong. They will be inappropriate if we are quite mistaken about the other, the suspected offense, or our position to judge. And even when our angry feelings are appropriate, we may wrongly nurse them and wrongly express them. Ideally, they should lead us to correct, forgive, and love the other. But when we hold onto angry feelings – that is, we “let the sun go down on our anger” – our vision becomes increasingly skewed: we are more inclined to focus on others’ blameworthiness, unattractiveness, and deserving to be hurt, and this makes it more difficult to notice their goodness and any mitigating circumstances to their actions.

Unchecked anger is dangerous in another way: since it has “a judgmental aspect,” Roberts notes, “if anger is practiced wholeheartedly and habitually, it can lead to a very distorted sense of one’s status vis-à-vis other sinners and vis-à-vis God.”

Roberts concludes, “Few things are uglier than a thoroughly irascible person, and it is clear why very early in the history of the Church anger came to be regarded as one of the seven deadly vices. When it gets deep and pervasive in a life it really does kill love and everything lovely.”

Study Questions

1. What are the four defining features of anger, according to Bob Roberts? Give some examples of *righteous* anger (i.e., when all of the features are realized in a proper way). Describe some specific cases of inappropriate anger in which one or more of the features is distorted in some way.
2. Why do some people fail to get angry about things that should make them mad?
3. Consider how Roberts describes the *vice* of anger. What are the differences between (what he calls) “a thoroughly irascible person” and someone who becomes properly angry?
4. Discuss how the three artists in Nathan Corbitt’s *Artful Anger* are helping their communities to express righteous anger.

Departing Hymn: “God of Grace and God of Glory” (vv. 1 and 5)

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
crown your ancient Church’s story;
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1930), alt.
Tune: CWM RHONDDA

Anger in the Christian Life

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To outline the features of anger and consider when it is morally appropriate to feel anger.
2. To distinguish the vice of anger from the morally appropriate instances of anger, and consider how the vice develops.
3. To discuss how art can help us express righteous anger.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Anger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory” locate the familiar tune CWM RHONDDA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Bob Roberts offers this witty vignette to guide our reflection on the nature of anger and its role within a loving relationship. “Molly and Mort have been married since Monday. For months they have planned a honeymoon tour of Kansas. On Tuesday they got as far as Indianapolis. They bedded down in a comfortable motel that served an early breakfast, and were set to make Topeka by night fall on Wednesday. Molly has heard so much about Topeka. She is sure this is going to be a perfectly wonderful beginning to a storybook honeymoon. But now Mort, returning to the room, has a sheepish look on his face.

“‘What’s up?’ Molly asks. ‘Are we all ready to go?’ ‘I’m awfully sorry,’ says Mort. ‘For safe keeping I set the keys to the rental car just inside the trunk while I loaded it. And you know when I next remembered they were there? It was the split second before I heard that trunk lid snap shut as firm and final as my decision to marry my little Molly-melon.’ To hide his embarrassment, interrupt the line of vision between their eyes, and protect himself from the emotion that he feels rising like a mighty tide in his sprightly bride, he approaches her for a kiss. (Mort, I might mention, is more mellow than Molly.)

“Molly is in no mood for kisses, and becomes less so when they discover that the locksmith is not available until 4:00 p.m. The hope of Topeka by nightfall is dead. Molly is mad. Not to be able to get to Topeka tonight is very bad. You could say she is frustrated: the circumstances are contrary to her wishes. You could also say she is disappointed: she was expecting something wonderful and now sees that it will not happen. But her emotion is more than irritation or disappointment. It is anger. In addition to seeing the circumstances as bad, she sees somebody as culpable.” (*Anger*, pp. 11-12)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins each section; after a few moments for silent petitions and confessions, the leader calls everyone to respond “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.”

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:21-5:2 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The role of anger in the Christian life seems problematic: when is it a necessary spur to recognize and confront evil, and when does it become a capital vice, or “deadly sin,” we must avoid? In this study we consider the essential features of the emotion of anger in order to explain when an *episode* of the emotion is morally appropriate and useful, and when it goes wrong. The *vice* of anger arises from repeated instances of anger, even righteous anger, which are not properly examined and expressed. In the next study guide, “Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger,” we will survey remedies for this vice.

If members want to learn more about the roles that emotions play in the Christian life, encourage them to read Bob Roberts’s *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*, which is reviewed in Trevor Thompson’s *Bringing Anger into the Light*. Thompson introduces other resources to understand the particular emotion of anger.

Study Questions

1. When one feels the *emotion* of anger, according to Roberts, one:
 - casts blame on someone (the offender),
 - wants that person to be hurt,
 - sees the person as unattractive, and
 - sees oneself as in a position to judge the offender.

Invite four small groups to brainstorm concrete examples in which just *one* of the features goes wrong – e.g., either the person is not at all (or not fully) blameworthy; one desires to hurt the person too much, or too little, or for the wrong reason, etc.; one exaggerates the person’s unattractiveness and ignores their goodness or their extenuating circumstances; or one is not really in a position to judge the offender.

Of course, we often make errors of judgment or perception in regard to several of the features at once. Consider why we make mistakes in regard to each one.

2. Members might identify failures of attention, knowledge, or caring in regard to each feature: e.g., in regard to the first, one might *not notice* an offense, *not know* the behavior is blameworthy, or *not care* that it is occurring (to this person, that group, regarding that thing); in regard to the second, one might *not know* how to punish the person properly, *not care* if they change their bad behavior, or *not care* if they are punished too much; in regard to the third, one might *not attend to* or *not know* the person’s good qualities and any extenuating circumstances, or *not care* about the whole person and her story; in regard to the last, one might *not attend to* or *not know* one’s own sinful condition, lack of insight, or biased perceptions, or *not care* enough about holding oneself and others to moral standards. Discuss concrete cases of passivity and lack of anger when there is clear injury and offense to oneself or others.
3. Roberts imagines Molly developing the vice of anger by nursing her feelings anger (the righteous as well as the inappropriate ones) for twenty years. “She gets mad only about things that affect her directly [or she takes personally], and in those cases she is quite indiscriminate.” About many other important things that should make her angry, she is oblivious. She also exaggerates real offenses, and nurses her angry feelings by imagining the offenders are “heinous and underhanded and irresponsible and despicable” and without any excuses. “Their good qualities become invisible to her.” She is too intent on making offenders suffer, and positively relishes the feeling of being morally superior to them. In sum, Molly’s patterns of attention, her self-knowledge, and her concerns have become so distorted that she is increasingly incapable of feeling anger in an appropriate way.
4. Nathan Corbitt identifies two important roles that these creative people – Jamaine Smith, Hannah Poon, and Natalie Hoffman – fulfill through their artwork: the *prophetic role* of “providing a window to the reality of our world” that allows us “to see ourselves at our best, and our worst” and calls us to action, and the *therapeutic role* of helping “survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking” articulate and move beyond their anger.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.