



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 21-29)

Suggested Article:

📖 Consuming Fury
(*Anger*, pp. 58-59)

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

Institute for Faith and Learning
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97270
Waco, TX 76798-7270
Phone 1-254-710-4805
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6

Meditation†

The fourth-century Christians who retreated to live in faithful communities in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine became familiar with the daily annoyances of living shoulder-to-shoulder with others. They told this story about their lurking propensity to anger:

A brother was restless in his community and he was often irritated. So he said, "I will go and live somewhere by myself. I will not be able to talk or listen to anyone and so I shall be at peace, and my passionate anger will cease." He went out and lived alone in a cave. But one day he filled his jug with water and put it on the ground. Suddenly it happened to fall over. He filled it again, and again it fell. This happened a third time. In a rage he snatched up the jug and smashed it. Coming to his senses, he knew that the demon of anger had mocked him, and he said, "Here I am by myself, and he has beaten me. I will return to the community. Wherever you live, you need effort and patience and above all God's help." So he got up and went back.

Reflection

"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,'" Ryan West writes. "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."

West commends three of the anger antidotes proposed by the desert Christians in the fourth century. He notes how these potential remedies help redirect and retrain (what the Apostle Paul calls) "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18)—which is the ability to appreciate God's work in our lives and relationships.

- ▶ *Watchfulness* involves "self-reconnaissance and a tactical implementation of the 'intel' that one gathers." In an anger journal we can briefly note the source and intensity of episodes of anger. Is the cause "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"? Later, when cooled down, we can return to the journal to ask: Was the anger justified? Was it too quick, intense, or long-lasting? Was it expressed well? "Done prayerfully, in conversation with trusted loved ones, and leaning heavily on God's Spirit," such journaling equips us "to be more effectively 'on the watch' in the future." Implementing what we learn can even become automatic, like defensive driving: "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."



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, is Senior Scholar in The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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▶ *Practicing virtues* – like compassion, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and gratitude – is not only *good in itself*, but also *good for retraining* our emotional perceptions of our situations. The virtues dispose us to notice the good in others and respond in anger-defeating ways. For instance, a “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.”

▶ *Prayer*, most importantly, turns us toward God for strength, encouragement, and assistance in resisting inappropriate anger. Also, in subtle ways prayer adjusts our perceptions of anger-raising situations. *On-the-spot prayers* can be habitual and second nature. When sensing a cue to anger, we might pray “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on *us sinners*,” including ourselves and the (actual or merely perceived) offenders in our prayer. This redirects our attention to our own liability for wrongdoing, and it begins a process of reconciliation, or forestalls a break in relationship, with the offender “by attending to our shared membership in the community of those for whom Christ died and who stand in need of God’s forgiveness.” Likewise, *off-the-spot prayers* for patience and gentleness in regular public worship and private devotion “provide us with an alternative set of interpretive categories and prime us to apply them.”

Because “dealing with anger is rather person-specific,” applying these practices requires practical wisdom and patience. West concludes, “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.... We should strive to appreciate God’s patience toward us and to emulate his attitude.”

Study Questions

1. How does an anger journal give us the personal sort of knowledge we need to resist inappropriate anger?
2. Consider how *on-the-spot* and *off-the-spot* prayers adjust how we see ourselves and offenders in anger-causing situations. What does this suggest about the value of habitual, automatic prayers and planned (personal or corporate) prayers?
3. How do the three anger antidotes change our *habits* of attention and perception? Why is this important?
4. In the story of the desert Christian in the meditation, what do you notice about the propensity toward anger?
5. Consider Giorgio Vasari’s depiction of fury in *The Damned Soul*. What does it suggest about the nature of anger?

Departing Hymn: “Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus”

† *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, 7.33, translated by Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 71.

Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce three practices from the early Christian tradition for resisting episodes of inappropriate anger.
2. To consider how these anger antidotes are effective in changing our habits of attention and perception.
3. To review depictions of inappropriate anger in Christian art and story.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

Bob Roberts often uses the famous nineteenth-century illusion drawing of the young girl and old woman to illustrate the role of perception in anger. (For the original drawing, see “Young Girl and Old Woman Optical Illusion,” www.opticalillusioncollection.com/2011/08/young-girl-and-old-woman-optical.html. Many contemporary variations are available on the Internet.) He writes, “If you look at the drawing one way, you see an ugly old woman with a large nose and pursed lips. If you look at it in another way, you see a beautiful young woman with a little turned-up nose looking coyly away from you. This change is known as a gestalt switch: the perceived difference is a matter not of seeing different details but of seeing the whole thing (‘gestalt’) in a different way. There are two different whole pictures. The two views blot each other out: when you are seeing the ugly woman, the beautiful one is invisible, and when you are seeing the beautiful one, the ugly woman is invisible.

“If you are able to see the drawing both ways, then any time you are seeing the ugly woman you are on the verge of seeing the beautiful one. All you have to do is switch gestalts. But some people are more inclined to see the ugly lady, and others more inclined to see the pretty one. You might say their gestalt switching has different default modes.”

Our looking at other persons in love or anger has a similar switch. Roberts explains, “An important part of love is seeing what is good in the beloved, appreciating him or her, taking pleasure in his company, finding her to be lovely, wonderful, clever, and sweet. But anger makes the other appear, for the moment, a bit repulsive, defective, and deformed” (Anger, 12-13). As we become an angry person, our switch can get stuck in the default mode of anger: we become disposed to focus on others’ defects and blameworthiness, and neglect their loveliness.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members grow in humility, gentleness, and patience in their dealings with one another and others.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:1-6 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study guide, “Anger in the Christian Life,” focuses on when anger is appropriate and helpful in the Christian life, and when it becomes inappropriate. This companion study guide reviews three specific practices – watchfulness, developing virtues, and prayer – that helped desert Christians resist inappropriate anger. This discussion of these anger antidotes, especially the emphasis on how they adjust our patterns of attention and perception in anger-causing situations, presupposes the analysis of anger in the previous study.

Study Questions

1. In the journal we record the *cause* and *intensity* of episodes of anger when they occur, and later *review their appropriateness*. We look for the recurring cues for anger and patterns in our response to these cues. The goal is knowledge “not simply...of the *human* condition, but of *my* condition,” Ryan West writes. “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.” With such *personal* knowledge, we can work toward new patterns of attention, perception, and response.
2. “*On-the-spot* prayers” are brief prayers that we pray out of habit in anger-causing situations. West commends this variation on the Jesus Prayer: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on *us sinners*.” Such prayer becomes part of our automatic, second nature response to anger cues. We don’t stop to ask “Is this offender a person for whom Christ died?” “Am I, too, a sinner?” Rather, we pray (silently) and perceive the offender and ourselves in these terms.
“*Off-the-spot* prayers” occur at other times, but are carefully crafted to prepare us to respond appropriately in anger-causing situations. We can pray these prayers regularly in personal devotion or in public worship. West commends Mother Theresa’s daily prayer. We might also regularly think of our tendency to inappropriate anger as we pray the Lord’s Prayer (“lead us not into temptation of *anger*”), or prayers of confession, and so on.
3. Breaking our bad habits of attention and perception, and forming good habits in their place are very important. If we want to rid ourselves of inappropriate anger, we must respond differently in anger-causing situations. We may have little time to think about and plan a response; we will simply react to anger cues. These antidotes can help shape our “first thoughts” about ourselves, the offender(s), and mitigating features in these situations.
Review each antidote to see how it makes us aware of bad habits, and forms us in good habits of responding to offense.
4. As we meditate on the stories of the desert Christians, we see deeper layers of interpretation and application to our lives. These suggestive stories cannot be reduced to simple ‘points.’ Members might notice that the problem of anger goes with the brother when he leaves the community of people who are irritating him. Is his restlessness a result or a cause of his irritability? His quick trigger to anger is humorously revealed in his projecting human qualities on the water jug – it is offending him! His destruction of the water jug is so out-of-place that it brings him “to his senses”; what do you think he notices about the situation, himself, and so on? The idea of a “demon of anger” may seem odd to us. Are there personal beings that tempt us? What other things outside us – personal enemies, cultural patterns, and so on – drag us toward irritability, no matter where we are or whom we are with?
5. Heidi Hornik wonders whether the anger is the cause or result of the figure’s damnation in Giorgio Vasari’s *The Damned Soul*. Vasari highlights the bodily disturbance associated with anger, which suggests the anger is (now) beyond the control of the person’s reason. The person looks crazed and inflamed by things beyond himself. His ‘look’ is deadly toward others; there seems to be no concern for the damage this expression of anger might do to himself or to others.

Departing Hymn

“Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus” is on pp. 53-55 of Anger. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.