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## **Anger 2**

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

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Barro Colorado is an island in Gatun Lake, part of the Panama Canal. The entire island is the Central American station of the Smithsonian Museum. On my last trip to the Canal Zone I decided to explore it. I caught the boat over to the island and set out on the many trails that were there. In my explorations I encountered a colony of Cebus monkeys. They were feeding on the figs that were plentiful in the undisturbed jungle. As I searched the tree tops for them, I was suddenly confronted by what was probably the alpha male ("top dog"). He came down to a lower limb and took a position that was supposed to convey threat. He bared his teeth and adopted a facial expression of anger. He made threatening moves as if he was going to attack me.

To see what he would do I adopted similar facial expressions and made similar threatening moves toward him. (I am glad there was no one else around to see me. They would have thought that I was out of my mind.) I could not climb to where he was perched, and I am sure he knew it, so he stood his ground and continued his threats. I finally got tired of the encounter, relaxed and started to walk away. Even so he held his pose until I was almost out of sight. Believing he had successfully driven me away he went back to the troop and resumed feeding.

This encounter was meaningful to me for it was motivated by a long time interest in emotion. It was easy to recognize that his display was evidence of the expression of anger intended to drive me away from his territory. His anger was an emotion that is expressed in most of the animal kingdom. When I later related the story of the encounter to some of my students, three of them immediately recognized that the expression of anger is built into our being. They knew this because they had seen it displayed in newborns. They had noted that the emotional display that accompanies the Perez reflex is of both fear and anger. The Perez reflex is elicited by holding a baby by his or her feet (upside down) and running a finger rapidly down the child's spine. The response is first one of fear and then shortly followed by one of anger. It is used to make a newborn aerate his or her lungs. It does so quite effectively. After they told me about it they documented their observations with rapid exposure photography. We compared what we saw in those children with those recorded in Darwin's *Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* and Mantagazza's book on the same subject. When we did this there was no question that what we saw was the facial expression of anger. It did not have to be learned!

All of our emotions are built into our central nervous system. I have seen children smile as they were being born. Jealousy can be seen as early as 6 months, love is present from the very beginning. And it is a well documented fact that empathy, the ability to respond to emotion, develops as early as the last trimester of fetal life. It follows that children in utero can empathically experience anger and love. This is why prayer for an unborn child has a positive effect on emotional development for they can also recognize love at that time.

Love and anger are dramatically opposed to one another. Love brings pleasure and tranquility to life and anger creates pain and discord. It is also true that when one emotion is present it occludes the other. Both love and anger are reflexly stored in our memories; love as it is and anger as resentment, hostility or hate.

The Christian faith is a faith of love. Paul summed it all up in the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians when he said that three things remain, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. But it is not love I wish to address in this essay. Anger is what creates the turmoil we see all around us. Anger results in conflict in the home, school, workplace, and in churches. It destroys relationships, and I believe it can be responsible for some wars. It affects everyone at some time or the other. It is a way of life for some people and for others it is a rare experience. There are reasons why this is true.

The most important origin of chronic anger is that a person is raised in an environment where anger is a constant occurrence. Anytime the child does something wrong or offensive there is an outburst of anger by a significant person, usually the father or mother or older sibling. If the directed anger is unjustified or the anger response excessive, the child realizes the injustice and responds with repressed anger that is stored in their memory. If it is great it becomes hate. Unfortunately, the child has a radical need for love so they continue to seek love only to receive more anger. Thus they secondarily develop a deprivation syndrome because most often any love they receive is conditional. If there is physical or sexual abuse the hate may become unmanageable. This creates another problem. Since they have not received love they do not know how to receive love and ignore any offers or simply reject it when it is professed.

When a child lives in an environment where responses are inconsistent they do not know how to respond. By inconsistent I mean that they receive outbursts of profound anger on one occasion or the same behavior is ignored on another. Children subjected to such inconsistency along with abusive behavior can develop chaotic or what we call borderline personalities.

These are extreme cases. What about the more consistently angry environments, or environments in which one parent is angry and the other loving? The answer here lies in the child's identification with the person(s) who display the anger. If the child sees expression of anger as normative they may behave according to the example set or react against it and repress all anger. If

they identify with an angry parent they will behave similarly. If, however, the loving parent is the object of identification, anger may not become a way of life for the child when they reach maturity.

Without doubt anger is a subject of concern to God. He created the emotion in man because he himself can be angry. God became angry at the Israelites when they worshiped the golden calf, but shortly thereafter he described himself as slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness. In Psalm 30:5 David says that God's anger lasts only for a moment but his favor lasts a lifetime. Solomon told us that a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1) and that a fool gives full vent to his anger (Prov. 29:11).

Because God is a God of love it is no wonder that his presence in our lives mutes the anger that we may have accumulated in our childhood. Even so it is important to remember that love does not keep a record of wrongs (1 Cor. 13:5b). Even after we become Christians we carry this record with us in our inner child of the past. It is, therefore, necessary that we inspect ourselves to find out if we need to deal with it so we can become the loving Christian that God calls us to be.

In my own life I had a huge record of wrongs that I had to deal with. Having grown up in a home where one parent was angry and the other loving, I was the recipient of anger brought from my angry parent's childhood. When the Lord finally told me to deal with my anger, He had prepared me to do so by helping me understand the inner child of the past and the power of His forgiveness to deal with my record of wrongs.

Forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts that we receive when we become a Christian. When Jesus took the punishment for all the sin of mankind upon himself as he hung on the cross he made it possible for us to be forgiven and forgive others. It was, however, only when the Holy Spirit was given that the promise of John 20:23 became a possession of all Christians. Jesus, before his ascension, breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive they are not forgiven." In giving this gift He inextricably linked forgiveness with the presence of the Holy Spirit in a believer. Our receipt of the Holy Spirit with salvation made it possible for us to get rid of our record of wrongs.

How does this occur? The mechanism of dealing with our record of wrongs works as follows. When we forgive, the Spirit detaches the stored emotional response from the memory of the wrong so that it no longer influences our responses in the present. This can only be accomplished by a work of the Holy Spirit. To explain this change I often quote Julian Marias, a Spanish philosopher, who said that we live in the present through the past in anticipation of the future. You can see then that if we alter our memories of the past by getting rid of our anger it profoundly changes our responses in the present. With our old anger eradicated we are able

to deal with anger provoking stimuli in the present much more effectively, and do not expect to be angry in the future.

It is important to remember, though, that our forgiveness of others is as much for our benefit as it is for the person we forgive. We now do not have to suffer the pain of anger. We will not have the tight "clutching" feeling in our epigastrium (the upper part of our abdomen). Our heart will not pound and our muscles will not be tense. Our head will not ache because the muscles attached to our scalp will be relaxed. We will not sigh. When this happens we will be able to love our enemies as Jesus commanded us to do.

I may have written about this before, but it is such a good example to anger control; I will repeat it. We got a new chairman of the department of psychiatry who did not want his department to have the reputation of harboring Christian psychiatrists. As I was the reason for their presence, he set out to diminish my influence. Through a series of maneuvers he succeeded. With each new one my anger would rise. Knowing that the Lord had commanded me to forgive him, I found myself doing it. So every time the memory of his latest wrong came to mind, I found that by doing this the anger did not interfere with my relationship with my patients or my relationship with my family or friends. As well, I did not have to suffer the pain of unresolved anger.

This technique serves my patients well too, especially those who are in situations that cannot be changed. For instance, a 17 year old whose mother does things that cause the patient pain, brings boyfriends into the house who are hostile to Mary or who make sexual overtures. The patient's income from her father's estate is spent by her mother on herself and not on Mary. All of these things make her angry. But what can she do? She can only repress her anger or forgive her mother. If she represses it she will be depressed by the anger turned inward. If she expresses it she is abused verbally by her mother and gets angrier still. When she confesses it to me she does not get relief unless I lead her to pray prayers of forgiveness. I am her confessor and when she has confessed it to me and to God in prayer, she is forgiven and can forgive.

There is no question that God has given us the tools to deal with anger. The real problem is that many times we do not want to deal with it. We want vengeance.

There are three methods of dealing with anger that we feel in the present and one that is for retained anger. For anger that we are experiencing in the present the first is to remove ourselves from an anger provoking situation. One can go into another room or walk around the block or go visit a neighbor until you have cooled off. The second is to begin to pray asking God to give you the control to inhibit the anger. Keep silent until the anger cools off in you and then continue the relationship. When you are in an argument you should be silent until the other person finally winds down. Then thank them for their opinion, tell them you will pray about it and let them know later what you decide. The third method is to

adopt an assertive method of communication. We will describe this later in the commentary.

For retained anger (hate or resentment) there is the forgiveness. Some years ago I found that a patient of mine hated her father. He had been a dominating, controlling parent who never affirmed her. We listed her record of wrongs and she confessed the anger associated with them. In one of our sessions I suggested she pray a prayer of forgiveness that went like this. "Lord Jesus, by the power you have given me I forgive my father for \_\_\_\_\_, etc. Thank you Jesus." We prayed, but she did not forgive her father. When I reminded her afterwards that she had not forgiven him, she said, "And that isn't the half of it. I'm not going to forgive him. I want to hate him some more." Three sessions later she said, "I think I'm ready to forgive him now." She did and was healed. Her relationship with him was dramatically changed. It is important to know that it was necessary for her to forgive him for many offenses before healing came.

Many of us, like the patient cited above, are locked into relationships from which we cannot extricate ourselves. It is the attitude of the person that gives rise to events that provoke anger. We may be married to someone who is selfish and self centered, who desires to dominate and control all aspects of the marriage. They do not communicate their intent but proceed to carry out their desires without consideration of their mate. This elicits anger in their spouse who has to repress the anger that wells up. He or she may become increasingly resentful until they can tolerate the anger no longer. At such a point they have to resolve it or get away from the person who stimulates their anger. In such situations the person can confess their feelings. Secular counseling at one time urged people to express their anger. The only problem with this is that when a person goes on the offense the other becomes defensive and either does not respond or retaliates aggressively.

The solution to such a situation is to respond assertively. Many counselors recommend a mnemonic (reminder) that goes as follows: When ( I am accused falsely, I am struck physically, cursed, vilified, etc.) I feel (angry, hurt, afraid, etc.) and I'd like (to change the situation). Always use I statements, never you statements. The latter are accusative and elicit defensive maneuvers on the part of the original aggressor. They will try to justify their behavior or attitude by further aggression.

Sadly few people know anything about the management of their emotions. It is for this reason I have written about anger. It is the emotion that needs the greatest control. Anger is not a bad emotion for we are told by Paul to be angry but to sin not. Repressing or expressing anger inappropriately is sinful. Only when we are assertive and confess our anger are we certain to sin not.

Spouse and child abuse most often is the result of uncontrolled anger. There is a continuous parade of persons who have come through my office and related a history of abuse. I have had persons who have been shot with bird shot from a 12 gauge shotgun. I have had women who have been terrorized by drunken fathers who threaten to kill them. One father would line his family up facing a wall and then shoot into the wall beside a child's head and say, "Guess who I just killed." One of my patient's was shot at as she ran terror stricken from the house and had the bullet hit a tree beside her head as she ran past. Her mother was screaming all the time for her to come back. When he shot so close she did come back, only to be beaten unmercifully. I have had patients who have been beaten with sticks, rods, belts, fists and have been slapped repeatedly. Others have been kicked and kicked and kicked with booted feet. It has not always been fathers who abused them for some have been equally abused by their mothers.

But physical abuse is less damaging than the verbal abuse that a child or spouse can receive. To be told over and again that you are dumb, stupid, ugly, a slut, whore, and any other epithets that you can think of is far more damaging. These accusations are stored in the child's or wife's memories and profoundly affect the person's self concept. Some female children think that if they are going to be accused of sexual activity they may as well do what they are accused of. They do, therefore, become promiscuous. Many abused children run away from home or marry early to escape the abuse. Often they make a mistake and marry an abusive man who continues the abuse.

One of my patients recently told me that her husband gets angry with her for stepping on the bath mat with wet feet. He controls money so tightly that she has nothing to spend unless she begs him for it. He also calls her all kinds of demeaning and insulting terms. He doesn't physically abuse her, but has threatened to do so. Finally after she had taken all she could tolerate she left.

Many persons who have been abused will tolerate further abuse because they hope that the person will change and love them. It is the radical need for love that keeps most people in an abusive relationship. The other reason they stay is fear. Many times they are threatened with death if they leave. Most abusive persons have a sadistic streak in them, not that they get sexual satisfaction out of abusing their children and mates, instead the load of anger that they carry from their childhood has to be taken out on someone. The safest persons to take it out on are those closest to them. The outside world will not tolerate it.

Finally I must say that anger does serve many useful purposes. God would not have given it to us if He did not expect it to be used constructively. It certainly serves the purpose of driving off threats to ourselves and our loved ones. When we are attacked we get angry and defend ourselves in anger. It stimulates us to higher effort and helps us achieve victory.

Anger stimulates us to aggression in any kind of competition. It sharpens our mind, and our sensations for we are more alert when we are angry. It enhances our reflex responses and increases our muscle power. In these circumstances it is a useful emotion.

Almost all of my patients have some anger problems that are part of the garbage they bring from their past. They wonder why they have so much trouble controlling their anger. It is a millstone that drags them down and handicaps them in their relationships with their spouses and their children, in their jobs and even in their relationships in the church. For those of you who have such a problem or are counseling people with the problem, the approach is rather simple. The first thing to do is to pray and ask God to reveal the sources of the anger. He knows you completely and wants you to be holy. You cannot be if you carry a load of anger around with you. Therefore we need to identify those events in our past life that made us angry and about which we could do nothing. To illustrate I cite the story of a man who at first denied anger but then told me his father was alcoholic. When I asked him what kind of a "drunk" he was, he told me he was "mean." I then asked him if his father ever did anything that had made him mad. He thought for a while and then told me that on one occasion he poured out a bottle of his father's liquor to keep him from continuing to drink. When his father found that he had poured it out he took the bottle and hit his son on the head. My patient said with obvious anger, "I wanted to kill him!" My response was, "And you say you did not get mad at him?" He then admitted that he was enraged and told me of other episodes when he was equally enraged. After he "owned" his anger I asked him to pray this prayer of forgiveness. "Lord Jesus, in your name and by your power I forgive my father for having hit me on the head with a liquor bottle. I confess that I wanted to kill him and ask your forgiveness for my rage. Thank you, Lord." We then dealt with some of the other episodes.

It is important to remember too that we often need to deal with an attitude of anger. We can do this by having the person go in prayer to the Lord and bring their angry attitude to him. I often have them visualize taking a box and putting their anger in it, then tie it up tight and take it to the foot of the cross where they lay it down and ask Jesus to cast it into the abyss. This is very helpful. Of course, they may have to do it several times to get a good result, but it works.

In addition Satan can use their problem to make their Christian life miserable. They can, in prayer, repudiate Satan and all his works and ask that any spirits of anger, rage, resentment and hate be bound and taken to Jesus for disposition. If Satan has exploited their anger, they will also be delivered from his contribution to their problem.

Finally let me say that we have made sure that we maintain our spiritual immunity. We do this by regularly practicing the means of grace. If we pray especially prayers of praise and thanksgiving, if we remain in His Word, if we

regularly celebrate communion, and worship in spirit and truth, we will maintain our immunity.

I was asked to write on this subject and I hope I have made it plain that we can rid ourselves of resentment and hate and we can control our anger. We are to be angry if appropriate, but we are not to sin. We can also dispose of our anger with ease if we follow the principles I have outlined here.