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Taming the Temper

(Part 1)

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Series: Tough Choices

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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You're driving down the freeway, minding your own business, reviewing your memory verses, or whatever it is you do when you drive down the freeway. Suddenly one of those little sports cars, the kind you've always wished you had, swerves in between you and the car ahead of you.

You feel a sudden surge of adrenaline. Your ears redden. Your hands grip the wheel as if it might need a little extra help. Your teeth grind—a dentist's nightmare. Suddenly, thoughts race through your mind you wouldn't want to include in your personal testimony. You're angry!

You come home from a tough day at the office—even the paper clips didn't work—and you need to be at a meeting at 7:00 PM. You told your wife you needed dinner on time. With a demanding scowl you fling open the door, but the house is empty.

The stove is cold.

And you get hot. At the moment you don't care why she's not there. You're angry.

Or you get to work and open your desk drawer and your favorite fountain pen is missing. Immediately you become the J. Edgar Hoover of the office brigade. Nothing else matters, not even business. Your pen is missing. Everyone is suspect. Look! There's Joe with a pen just like the one you lost. He's guilty! You know he's guilty. You never did trust Joe! Your mind goes wild. You're angry!

You take your stereo to the shop to be repaired. They promised it in two days. Two weeks pass—two long quiet weeks—but still it isn't ready.

"They haven't even looked at it yet," you fume. "Let me speak to the manager. I need that stereo!" you bellow. "My well-being is affected. Either fix it by Friday or I'll take it some place else. No, I

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don't care how hard it is to get parts. Fix it!" You're angry!

You stop at the supermarket for a couple of items. You roll your cart up to the fast check-out lane. "For those with six items or less," the sign says. You have only three.

Your eyes begin to peruse the cart ahead of you in line. The woman has seven items. Count 'em—seven! She gets to the counter. The first item isn't marked. The clerk has to go find out the price. The second item is mismarked, and the customer questions the price. The third item is defective. It has to be replaced. Two minutes and eighteen seconds of your valuable time have been wasted. You could have gone through the regular line, you fume. You glare at the woman. "I thought this was the express line," you mutter under your breath. Just then, she turns, and for the first time you see her face, and she says, "Oh, I know you from church, don't I? My name is..."

Now your face gets red. You're embarrassed. You feel guilty. You were impatient. You were angry!

Your child comes home with a bad grade. Your mind races back to your own failures as a student. You lose your temper. You fly off the handle, make rash threats, say condemning things, critical things you later wish you hadn't said. The child rushes from the room in tears, rejected and crushed. You have to apologize, not for your disappointment over his grades, but for your anger.

Anger is the emotion that, if not properly handled, unravels reason, distorts the truth, and releases, even in a normally gentle individual, a venom that falsely accuses, denies sensibility, and becomes on occasion vicious, vengeful, and vindictive.

In one minute anger can destroy your testimony, wound the tender heart of one you love, and bring doubts, accusations, and contention into what had been a peaceful relationship. It can so grieve the Holy Spirit of God that you literally sense the power ebb, the peace vanish, and the joy dissolve.

Anger out of control can wreck families, friendships, and fellowships. Is it any wonder that a life under God's control must also have under control the enemy of ungodly anger? Is it any wonder that taming the temper is no option for the Spirit-controlled life?

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THE PRINCIPLES

In our search for godly wisdom we must find the mind of Christ in this important area of self-control. We will begin by looking at the principles found in Proverbs concerning anger. These principles will form the backdrop for the rest of our study. There are at least six principles which give a clear picture of why God wants the temper tamed.

Principle 1:

A quick-tempered man does foolish things,
(Proverbs 14:17)

A short-tempered man is a fool. (TLB)

The Scriptures portray a fool as someone unteachable and uncontrollable. No matter how theologically knowledgeable you may be, no matter how religiously active or spiritually mature you may appear to be, the Scripture says that if you cannot control your temper, if your anger is anything other than a deliberate choice over the objections of your emotions, you are a fool. Your life is not under control if your temper is not under control.

Principle 2: Under the influence of uncontrolled anger you will be unproductive and make serious mistakes. When the blood is boiling, the head is not clear. When the head is not clear, the best you can do is avoid trouble. The worst you can do is create a disaster.

A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly. (Proverbs 14:29)

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:9)

The one who in anger sows seeds of iniquity will produce, at best, nothing. In short, an uncontrolled temper is the catalyst that releases an unproductive spirit and causes us to say and to do what we wish we had never said or done.

Principle 3: The man of God must control his temper. It is a choice he has to make. Solomon wrote,

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is his glory to overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11)

The Living Bible paraphrases it as,

A wise man restrains his anger and overlooks insults. This is to his credit. (Proverbs 19:11 TLB)

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A similar thought is:

A rebel shouts in anger; a wise man holds his temper in and controls it. (Proverbs 29:11 TLB)

These Scripture verses are saying that an angry man is a fool who makes mistakes, not because God made him angry and not because of the person's temperament. It is obvious that anger is a more natural response for some than for others, but the issue is restraint—the issue is control. Everyone has some areas that are harder for them to control than for others. While gluttony may be tough for you, it may present no problem for someone else. Jealousy may be your besetting emotion, while lust may be another's. But there is no excuse. Whatever area of life is out of control, God wants to bring it under control.

God wants to restrain and control the angry spirit.

Principle 4: Anger destroys friendships and relationships and produces strife. It separates friend from friend, parent from child, brother from brother.

A brother offended is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.

(Proverbs 18:19)

It is a spiritual law that anger separates people, and once they are separated, winning them back is like winning a war. It's a fact of life. Anger separates people.

Principle 5: Do not choose angry men for friends or you will become angry, too.

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.

(Proverbs 22:24, 25)

Anger is such a crippling disease that one should give it this label: "Caution: Constant exposure to angry people can be fatal to your spiritual well-being."

Principle 6: Do not unnecessarily anger those in authority over you. Our last principle from Proverbs is a special kind of warning, not about your anger, but about your causing anger in others.

In many cases, the king is referred to in Scripture to represent the realm of God-ordained authority, as

The king's heart (the one in authority) is in the hand of the Lord.

(Proverbs 21:1)

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And so on. Now consider what Scripture says about provoking his anger through disobedience or rebellion:

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it. (Proverbs 16:14)

A similar thought is:

A king's rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass. (Proverbs 19:12)

Being angry or provoking anger in others, particularly those who rule over you, is not a matter to be taken lightly. An uncontrolled temper, Scripture says, is the hallmark of a fool, whose life will be unproductive and marked by the foolish mistakes he made when his life was out of control.

An angry spirit will destroy friendships and lives. We are cautioned not even to become close friends with men or women who cannot control their tempers. So anger, a temper out of control, must be brought under control if the Spirit-controlled life is to be ours

THE PROBLEMS

As we step back to look at the subject of anger, our vision blurs and our minds are easily confused because of four problem areas Satan uses to baffle us.

The first problem is that God gets angry.

And on occasion, God not only condones but encourages anger in us. Another problem is that in most cases, as we have seen in this chapter, God condemns anger and we are told to "put it away" once and for all. The final problem is that many of us do not clearly understand what is, and what is not, acceptable anger. So we must, before we get personal and practical about taming the temper, sort out what kind of anger is, and what kind of anger is not, acceptable to God.

We cannot say outright that anger itself is sinful because God himself gets angry. From the Scriptures we learn that he is angry at unbelief. It is true that God, who is a God of love, is also a God of wrath to all who reject his offer of salvation. No matter what those who would water down God's judgment today testify, the wrath of God and the love of God cannot be separated. They are two parts of the same character.

God has a predetermined position where sin is concerned. He

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hates it. It separates the creature from the Creator for all eternity, unless that man or woman visits the Cross, accepts the gift, and is delivered from the penalty of sin (eternal death), which is the foreordained, predetermined result of the wrath of God toward sin.

The man or woman who goes to hell does so, not because God in a fit of anger had all he could take and, temper out of control, sentenced him to death but because he or she chose to reject the gift of God's grace offered equally to all, choosing rather to endure the wrath of God—a constant state of his anger toward sin.

So God's eternal wrath is the natural state of the mind of God with respect to sin (Romans 1:18). He hates it. It grieves his heart, thwarts his purposes, mocks his love. He deliberately, by an act of his will, chose to be angry over sin. And so should we.

But God's wrath is not confined to his eternal judgment of sin. God also gets angry when his children disobey. God got angry when his children rejected walking in his ways and chose rather idolatry and witchcraft (Psalm 78:52-64; II Kings 21). He got angry, and he still does.

We read that God gets angry over an unforgiving spirit (Matthew 18:34). He still does. God got angry when his children compromised in their relationships with the world (Numbers 25). He still does. God got angry at partial obedience (Joshua 7). He still does. God got angry when his own people would not trust his word (Exodus 4; Numbers 32). He still does. God does get angry. He has a predetermined, foreordained hatred of Satan, sin, and what sin produces.

While it is true that the things that make God angry set a partial pattern for the kind of things that ought to produce righteous anger in us, we cannot assume that we have a right to be angry over anything God gets angry over, because we are not God.

When we justify our anger based on God's holy anger, remember that God is perfectly holy, and all sin justifiably offends his nature. He has never sinned; therefore, he alone has the right to wear the robes of judgment.

We did not have the right to get angry over the man who cut in front of us on the freeway. We have done the same or worse.

We did not have the right to get angry over a late meal. If we

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were the cook, we probably would not eat until nine.

We are not perfect. Therefore, our anger over things that simply challenge our rights or our reputation is unacceptable.

God is omniscient. He has all the facts. He even sees the heart. That guy on the freeway may have been a doctor rushing to the hospital to save a life. You don't know, but God does. So leave it to him.

Your wife may have been detained by an emergency or a car failure or someone who needed help desperately. In the moment of your anger you did not have all the facts. But God does. Give it to Him.

You may have left that fountain pen at home and just thought it was stolen. In the moment of your anger you did not have all the facts. You are not omniscient, but God is. Leave your fountain pen in his care.

God owns you so He is responsible. He is the giver of all things. As Job said, "The Lord gives; the Lord takes away." As owner, He has rights you do not have. If you want to scold your children, you do so; but let a stranger scold them or get angry for the same things, and you are offended, because that child is your responsibility. You have a right to be angry.

If one of God's children says something or does something you do not like, tell their father—their Heavenly Father. Whether or not he gets angry is up to Him. But you have no license, as they do not belong to you.

So it isn't wise to try to mimic God's anger. God is perfect holiness; you are not. God is omniscient; you are not. God has ownership, and therefore responsibility; you do not.

As we'll see later, there is a pattern of how to be angry over sin which we can discover by watching God; but we cannot justify our anger because of his, for He is God, and we are not.

The anger of God is an anger totally dominated by and totally determined by love. His anger is directed at Satan, at sin, and at what sin produces, because Satan, sin and what sin produces have made a shamble of the lives of those God loves, those he created in his image, those he designed in his likeness.

Four things are true about his anger:

His anger is slow in coming. Nehemiah wrote: "You are a

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forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Nehemiah 9:17). The psalmist wrote: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8). He desires to shorten its duration. “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy” (Micah 7:18).

He both forgives and forgets when it is over. Micah wrote,

“You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea”
(Micah 7:19)

He longs to comfort us when it is over. Isaiah wrote,

“In that day you will say: ‘I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away, and you have comforted me.’”
(Isaiah 12:1)

His anger lasts only for a moment. The psalmist wrote,

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.
(Psalm 30:5)

Because God hates sin, God gets angry, but with an anger motivated and controlled by love. So must ours be. The anger of God gives us a pattern but does not give us a license to be angry.

When does anger, which is sometimes a proper emotion, become unrighteous anger? In the next chapter we will look at this in more detail, but in the New Testament Greek, God condemns some anger and condones other. There are several kinds of anger mentioned in the Greek New Testament

The first is the turbulent, boiling agitation of the feelings, which boils up and soon subsides. In Ephesians 4:31 we are told that this kind of anger must be put away. Loss of control characterizes the anger you felt on the freeway and in the grocery line—not a deliberate choice but an emotional response. Uncontrolled, it always leads to regrets.

The second kind of anger is the slow-acting, long-boiling kind that festers with a bitter spirit. It is long in coming, but it is still an emotional response to frustration or exasperation. In Ephesians 4:26 we are told not to nurse that kind of anger, but to deal with it before sundown.

Another kind of anger is an abiding, settled habit of mind

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that is aroused when the right conditions are met. It is the result of deliberate choice, more volitional than emotional. It can be the godly response of man to Satan, to sin, and to the suffering sin produces. We ought to choose to get angry at pornography, drug traffic, the practice of witchcraft, corruption in high places, the persecution of missionaries, and the lies Satan has sold our generation.

We ought to have a settled frame of mind where sin is concerned: a settled response, a deliberate, predetermined mindset against these things.

God expresses his anger in several ways. The eternal wrath of God, the settled mind of God is against sin. Sin is unacceptable to God, but Jesus paid the price in order that those who come to God in God's way through Jesus Christ need not fear the wrath of God. But those who refuse to come to God through Jesus Christ must face the wrath of God. The eternal wrath of God, then, is the settled mind of God where sin is concerned, and the choice is totally man's whether or not to suffer the wrath of God.

The anger of God has been expressed toward disobedience. Anger is God's settled frame of mind and chosen course of action where religion is concerned. He is patient, therefore He is slow to anger. He is mercy, therefore his anger never violates his mercy. He is righteous, therefore his anger is always just and never partial. He is love, therefore he longs to comfort and restore.

But God has a settled mind toward rebellion and disobedience, and at some point his anger will result in discipline.

It is also proper for believers to respond with grief and, when appropriate, with discipline when Satan, sin, or the results of sin bring dishonor to the reputation or character of God.

If your child does something immoral or illegal you have a right to be angry. You have a responsibility to be angry—angry at Satan for what he has done to destroy God's creation, angry at the sin for its effect on lives, and angry at your child for choosing to trample underfoot the character of God. That is righteous anger. But as we will see in the next chapter, it must be accompanied by right motives and a right response.

It is also possible for believers to sin through their anger. The temper out of control, a response of the will to the emotions of the moment, is foolish; it results in mistakes, produces nothing good,

and destroys people and relationships.

Improper reaction is possible even when the anger itself is justified. For example, you told Johnny to stay out of the mud on his way home from school. When he arrives at the front door looking like a candidate for the “before” part of a soap commercial, you would expect anyone to be angry. God placed that child under your authority, and his rebellion to you is rebellion to God. You have a responsibility to demonstrate displeasure and to discipline him. That is anger expressed properly. But a screaming fit of rage that is more reaction than reason, or that disciplines hysterically, is not acceptable anger. It is the temper out of control. It damages your testimony, confuses your child about God’s anger, and replaces logical cause-and-effect discipline with rejection and bitterness. You lose. The child loses. Neither the child nor the world has witnessed godly anger.

Ungodly anger is also the slow, boiling resentment fueled by bitterness that results in an ungodly response. Suppose someone has offended you in the past, and you have never forgotten it. Inside you boil at the mention of his or her name. You pretend to have forgiven, but you hold a grudge. At the slightest provocation you assault the person’s character, reject the person’s love, or judge his or her actions. Your standards for the other’s behavior are not based on logic but on resentment. You may call it anger, but God calls it sin.

If Jesus held that kind of grudge, we would all be lost. Instead, he prayed for those who harmed him most: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) It was the Father’s job to deal with them. It was Jesus’ job to pray for them and to die for them.

What you consider “righteous” anger seems to be an acceptable response in situations where your rights or your reputation, rather than God’s, have been violated. If you assume a settled course of getting even or demanding your way, your anger, though it may be controlled, is not righteous anger because you are assuming rights you do not have. You are not your own. You have been bought with a price, and now those rights are God’s.

The driver that violated your right to access on the freeway, or even your right to safety, is not yours to deal with. He is not under your authority. You are not omniscient. You do not have the facts. You are not holy. You have done things just as inconsiderate. If

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he is in violation of the law, the police are responsible. If he is acting irresponsibly, tell the Father. But if he is violating your rights, pray for him. Bless him. Do good to him.

Besides, there is a good chance that God put him there to test your response. And your clenched fist and grinding teeth give you the grade of about a D-.

The woman in the check-out line was not your concern either. You are not perfect. You have slowed others down. You are not omniscient. You do not know her heart. She may have thought she had only six items.

Besides, it is the grocery store's realm of authority—not yours. God was just testing your patience. Again you get a D-. And isn't it strange how different our responses are when we think the other person knows how spiritual we are supposed to be? That's why you were embarrassed when she recognized you not because your attitude was wrong but because your reputation was threatened.

The lost pen, the late supper, the stereo repairman all represent the same problem of anger based on the violation of rights you gave up at Calvary. If those rights are not ours, what right have we to get angry? Those situations are not occasions to anger but tests of our testimony that others may see Jesus our everyday life. Peter wrote, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate...he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly" (I Peter 2:21, 23).

So the truth is, there is such a thing as righteous anger, a controlled, deliberate response to Satan, to sin, and to sin's scars. Righteous anger is nothing more than the Spirit of a holy God in control of a life. But most of our anger leads to something worse. Most of our anger is emotion with no regard for the truth of the Word. It usually results in the temper going out of control. If we yield to that kind of anger it makes us fools, destined for grief, hurting others as we go.

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FOCUS ON APPLICATION

Use your Bible (a modern paraphrase such as The Living Bible would be helpful) to fill in the blanks below.

1- A short-tempered man is a _____

(Proverbs 14:17; 25; 28; Ecclesiastes 7:9)

2- Anger often produces _____

(Proverbs 14:29; 22:8; 30:33)

3- God's man must learn to _____

(Proverbs 19:11; 29:11)

4- Anger destroys _____

(Proverbs 11:29; 30:33)

5- Do not choose _____

(Proverbs 22:24, 25)

6- Do not unnecessarily provoke to anger those who are in _____

(Proverbs 14:35; 16:14; 19:12; 20:2)

PROJECT

- 1- Begin a personal diary, listing the things that make you angry.
- 2- Decide which ones are
 - a. temper out of control
 - b. slow, boiling resentment
 - c. the claiming of rights you do not have.
- 3- Practice quietly turning to God as you sense the anger appearing, and choose the mind of Christ.

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FOR FURTHER STUDY

Without referring to the chapter, but using only the verses listed, fill in the blanks with the appropriate word or phrase. These things make God angry:

- _____ Psalm 78:52-64
- _____ Matthew 18:34
- _____ Numbers 25
- _____ Joshua 7
- _____ Numbers 32

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