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Taming the Temper

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Series: Living Lessons From Proverbs



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Taming the Temper

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, the paper clips didn't even work, and you need to be at a meeting at 7:00 p.m. 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.

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

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You stop at the supermarket for a couple of items. You roll your cart up to the fast checkout 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 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? Anger is a very real problem in a very real world.

Our outline for “Taming the Temper (Part 1)”:

Taming the Temper

I- The Issue of Anger

- A- Principles from Proverbs
- B- Problems to Solve

II- The Anger of God

- A- His Wrath at Unbelief
- B- His Anger at Disobedience
- C- His Anger and Ours
- D- His Anger and His Love

III- The Anger of Man

- A- Righteous Anger
- B- Unrighteous Anger

This foundational lesson on the subject of anger must be laid or the building will not stand. It will put in place the principles which will later be applied.

You will recall

- 1- We are looking at life through the lens of Proverbs. Proverbs is our base; the whole Scripture is our authority.
- 2- Our objective is wisdom
the mind of Christ in control of the Christian life.
- 3- The basic issue at hand is self control—the will under the control of the Word over the objections of the appetites and the emotions.

I- THE ISSUE OF ANGER

A- Principles from Proverbs

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: The book of Proverbs says that a short tempered man is a fool. The King James Version says

He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly: (Proverbs (14:17a)

In the New International version the same verse reads

A quick-tempered man does foolish things,

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And in The Living Bible paraphrase, Kenneth Taylor puts it bluntly,

A short-tempered man is a fool.

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 to avoid trouble. The worst you can do is create a disaster. Reading Proverbs 14:29 we see

He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding, but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly. (KJV)

A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly. (NIV)

Another translation says,

He who is slow to be angry has good sense, but he whose spirit is over quick gives support to what is foolish.

Ken Taylor says,

A wise man controls his temper. He knows that anger causes mistakes. (TLB)

If only we could take back those words we uttered in a fit of rage. If only we could take back those decisions we made in a flurry of anger.

He that soweth iniquity shall reap vanity: and the rod of his anger will fail. (Proverbs 22:8 KJV)

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 that which we later wish we had never said or done.

Principle 3: The man of God must control his temper. The woman of God must control her temper. It is a choice he or she has to make. Compare Proverbs 19:11 in various translations,

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It is prudent for a man to restrain his anger. It is his glory to overlook an offense. (Berkeley)

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

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

Similar thoughts are:

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

Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:9 KJV)

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

These Scripture verses are saying that an angry man is a fool who makes mistakes, not because God made him angry, nor 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. However, 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. Again, comparing translations, Proverbs 18:19:

A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle. (KJV)

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

It is harder to win back the friendship of an offended brother than to capture a fortified city. His anger shuts you out like iron bars. (TLB)

The last words of Proverbs tell us in chapter 30, verse 33,

Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife. (KJV)

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As the churning of cream yields butter, and a blow to the nose causes bleeding, so anger causes quarrels. (TLB)

It is a spiritual law that anger causes fights and separates people. Once 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. Proverbs 22:24,25:

Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go;

Lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul. (KJV)

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. (NIV)

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 21:1a)

Now consider what Scripture says about provoking his anger through disobedience or rebellion:

The wrath of a king is as messengers of death: but a wise man will pacify it. (Proverbs 16:14 KJV)

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

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 NIV)

or

The king's fury is like that of a roaring lion; to rouse his anger is to risk your life. (Proverbs 20:2 TLB)

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or

A king rejoices in servants who know what they are doing; he is angry with those who cause trouble. (Proverbs 14:35 TLB)

Now it comes home to the family:

The fool who provokes his family to anger and resentment will finally have nothing worthwhile left. He shall be the servant of a wiser man. (Proverbs 11:29 TLB)

He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart.

(Proverbs 11:29 KJV)

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. Anger, a temper out of control, must be brought under control if the Spirit-controlled life is to be ours.

B- Problems to Solve

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.

(1) God gets angry. He really does, and that confuses some of us.

(2) Not only does God get angry and not only does He occasionally condone anger in us, but sometimes he demands it of us. That is confusing.

(3) 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.

(4) The final problem is that many of us do not clearly understand what is, and what is not, acceptable anger. 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 in itself is sinful because

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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 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, which is eternal death. Eternal death is the foreordained, predetermined result of the wrath of God toward sin.

The man who goes to hell does so, not because God in a fit of anger had all He could take and, with temper out of control, sentenced him to death. The man or woman who spends eternity in hell does so 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.

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.

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 servant was selfish with His message. He still does. (Jonah 4) God got angry when His children rejected walking in His ways and chose rather idolatry and witchcraft (Psalm 78:52-64; 2 Kings 21). He got angry, and He still does. God got angry when His children rebelled against authority. He still does. (Numbers 12)

We read that God got angry over an unforgiving spirit (Matthew 18:32-34). 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

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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 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. 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. 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. 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

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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.

II- THE ANGER OF GOD

Five things are true about God's anger:

His anger is slow in coming.

Nehemiah wrote,

You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. (Nehemiah 9:17b NIV)

The psalmist wrote:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. (Psalm 103:8 NIV)

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 NIV)

He both forgives and forgets when it is over.

Micah wrote,

You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins under foot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19 NIV)

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 NIV)

His anger lasts only for a moment.

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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 NIV)

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

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 anger. Kenneth Wuest says that there are 3 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.

The third kind of anger is an abiding, settled habit of mind 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 affords. 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.

So let's define anger—God's anger and man's anger, that which is acceptable and that which isn't.

God's anger has two parts. First is the eternal wrath of God—

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it is the settled mind of God 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. However, those who refuse to come to God through Jesus Christ must face the wrath of God. It is not because God wants it; He doesn't. Jesus died to prevent it; facing the wrath of God is because you choose to do so. Were He to make one exception, His Word would be void, He would cease to be God, and Jesus would have died in vain. 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 second part of the anger of God has been expressed toward disobedience. This anger is God's settled frame of mind and chosen course of action where rebellion is concerned. He is patient, therefore He is slow to anger. He is grace, therefore, He forgives and forgets. 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.

However, God has a settled mind toward rebellion and disobedience, and at some point, His anger will result in discipline if it is not abated by repentance.

III- THE ANGER OF MAN

Righteous Anger is a settled mind, a predetermined decision, a choice 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. It is not the temper out of control; it is the mind tempered under the control of the Holy Spirit.

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 under foot the character of God. That is righteous anger. However, as we will see in the next chapter, it must be accompanied by right motives and a right response.

Unrighteous Anger is what God does not tolerate. There are three parts to this kind of anger.

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Part 1- The temper out of control as is a response of the will to the emotions of the moment. It is foolish; it results in mistakes, produces nothing good, and destroys people and relationships. It's an improper reaction 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. This is followed by a clear discussion, then a demonstration of affection and acceptance upon repentance, and a clear warning for the future. That is anger expressed properly. However, 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.

Part 2- The slow boiling response to resentment or bitterness.

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 NIV). It was the Father's job to deal with them. It was Jesus' job to pray for them and to die for them.

Part 3- The right kind of response to the wrong situation.

Ungodly anger seems an acceptable response to situations in which your rights or your reputation rather than God's have been violated. Even if you assume a settled course of getting even or demanding your way, your anger, though it may be controlled, is

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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 he is in violation of the law, the police are responsible. If he is acting irresponsibly, tell the Father. 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. Your clenched fist and grinding teeth give you the grade of about a D-.

The woman in the checkout 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-. 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. It was because your reputation was threatened.

The lost pen, the late supper, and the stereo repairman—all represent the same problem of anger based on the violation of rights you were to have given 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 in 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...instead He entrusted himself to Him who judges justly" (I Peter 2:21, 23 NIV).

Anger is a complicated issue. It's complicated because God gets angry; it is complicated because on occasions we're to get angry. That settled, predetermined response to Satan, sin, and suffering that deals grief and, when appropriate, discipline is of God and glorifies God.

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However, the turbulent emotional loss of control that destroys our testimony is not of God. The slow boiling, finally erupting kind of anger that's built on and fed by a bitter spirit, that is not of God. The deliberate, abiding, settled mind that responds in anger when our rights or our reputation is threatened is not of God either.

So the truth is, there is such a thing as righteous anger, but it is 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. 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. God says that if we yield to that kind of anger, it makes us fools, destined for grief, hurting others as we go.

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Oh, to tame the temper,
What glory that would be!
A godly gentle planned response
For all the world to see.

Not a reign of terror
Or a deadly fit of rage
That makes our neighbors wonder
If we don't need a cage.

Not a pouting vengeance
That boils and then explodes,
Because we've nourished bitterness
From long past episodes.

Not a predetermined course
To choose to treat as bad
Violations of our rights—
Rights we've never had.

No, to tame the temper,
That's God's perfect goal;
To ever have our anger
Underneath His firm control.

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FOCUS AND 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 18:32-34
- _____ Numbers 25
- _____ Joshua 7
- _____ Numbers 32

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