

## “How Do I Make Life Work? Manage Anger...”

**People do crazy things when they lose their tempers, don't they? At every age...**

Ever seen a toddler **Toddler Tantrum** throw a temper tantrum? Wailing and screaming and throwing their little bodies down on the ground, flailing their stubby arms, kicking legs. You'd think they'd gone mad!

Ever seen a teenager **Angry Teenager** lose his or her temper? You've probably heard about a teenage boy slamming his fists into a brick wall in anger, ruining his athletic career—all because his girlfriend had just dumped him and he was mad.

Have you ever seen a young mother **Angry Mother** with two preschoolers and a husband who is never home lose her temper? It's not a pretty sight! Pots and pans fly around the kitchen, dining room chairs skid across the floor, and worst of all, little kids get screamed at for doing the things that little kids just do. In her right mind, every mom knows better than to let it fly, but this mom is not in her right mind—she's mad.

Have you ever seen a grown man **Angry Man** lose control of his temper? This can be a very scary thing because of his strength and power and what can happen when they're out of control. The damage can be anything from destroying stuff in the house, to violence against his wife or kids. With language everywhere from mild profanity to God-damning language that let's everybody know he's mad...really, really mad.

In the U.S. we use the words “angry” and “mad” interchangeably. “Watch out, mom is mad!” “The boss is mad.” “Give me some space, I'm mad!” But the word “mad” actually means insane, or crazy. “Mad = insane. Angry = strong feelings of displeasure. The word “angry” actually means having “strong feelings of displeasure.”

What I'm getting at here is that being angry should not be interchangeable with going insane, and doing things that are destructive, dangerous, out of control and sinful.

In fact the Bible goes to great lengths to show us that anger and madness are very different. Paul says to the Christians in Ephesus, “Be angry but do not sin...” (Ephesians 4:26, NRSV). In other words, it's OK to be angry, it's OK to have strong feelings of displeasure. But it's not OK to let that anger build into actions that are sinful. It's not OK to throw tantrums, frying pans or fists.

If we want to make life work, then we have to manage our anger “**Making Life Work: Manage Anger**. This is one more tool in our toolboxes in making life work along with the other things we have learned from God's ageless and priceless wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Other tools we've talked about are pursuing wisdom, and taking initiative. How do we make our lives work? Well, today we're going to equip ourselves so that we can manage our anger. Take out your outlines...

According to the Bible there is a way to express anger constructively, but it's not easy. Proverbs 16:32 says, “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled [is better] than one who captures a city” (Proverbs 16:32, NRSV). I appreciate this passage. The writer is implying that sometimes it takes more strength and courage to control our emotions than it does to capture a fortified city!

Well, you know this next question is coming! Have you lost your temper lately? Have you screamed irrationally at your kids...maybe even hit them? Have you left your wife or husband just shaking from your words? Are you the kind of person who snipes at the bank teller when he or she makes a mistake? Do you find yourself honking your horn when you get caught in traffic? Have family celebrations, holidays, been ruined because you've lost your temper? Sometimes, is the air around you thick with irritability?

Proverbs is telling us that controlling our anger is better than being a mighty war hero who can capture cities. If we want to make life work we need to manage our anger, but all too often we fall short.

We don't know for sure why, but some of us have shorter anger-fuses than others. We don't know why some people get violent when they get angry and others stuff it down inside, but one thing we can know for sure is that God created us with the capacity to get angry. In fact, sometimes God gets angry. We see it in the Bible when God's anger is kindled against sin and injustice. Psalm 30:5 says that God's “anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a life time” (Psalm 30:5, NIV). Over and over the Bible repeats what Psalm 145 says, “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (Psalm 145:8, NIV).

So, yes, God gets angry, but we need to know that his anger is never the end of the story. God's anger is real, but it only lasts for a little while. His love goes far beyond his anger. Since we're made in God's image we've got that same built-in capacity

to experience anger. And if God himself gets angry, we know that it's not a sinful emotion. God's anger is righteous and ours can be too. Our anger, when we manage it in the right ways, can energize us to take actions that are good and right.

In fact, some of the best actions Christians have taken were prompted by anger. There have been times when I've gotten so angry at myself because I've repeated mistakes or failures or sin that my anger at myself helped me to do what I needed to do to make a change.

Many Christians have gotten so angry over injustices they've seen around them that their anger prompted them to start new ministries to support others. There are many God-honoring things that have occurred over time because somebody got angry about an injustice and did something constructive about it.

This kind of anger is not a problem. The problem is that a lot of times we don't know how to manage our anger. Our judgement and good intentions get buried under destructive, angry responses.

The truth is that very few of us have ever really been taught how to manage our feelings of anger so we deal with them in one of two ways. Either we bottle them up or we spew them out. Let me explain the difference.

**Bottlers tend to say that they don't ever get deeply upset by the hurts, disappointments, and frustrations of life.** They may even take pride in the fact that they never get angry. Many bottlers believe that anger is a bad thing and needs to be shoved down, bottled and capped off. They think they are doing the God-honoring thing...they're also convinced that this will work. Their motto with anger is "Out of sight, out of mind."

The problem is that they're deceiving themselves! You see, bottling our anger and burying it is a lot like the environmental problem of burying toxic waste. We put this toxic poison in canisters and bury it underground just outside the city limits. Everybody thinks the problem is gone. But later, people in the city start to get sick and finally they trace the cause back to those buried canisters of poison. They leaked their poisons into the water table making people sick.

Please listen. Bottled-up anger does the exact same thing! Bottled-up anger always leaks, and when it does it poisons our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our relationships. It poisons our bodies in the form of headaches, stomach problems, sleep disorders and other physical symptoms. It poisons our minds in the form of distorted thinking, irrationality, lost of self-esteem, cynicism, hopelessness. Serious depression can also be the result of chronically internalizing anger.

All these internal physical and mental symptoms won't stay inside very long. They start to show on the outside as we get irritable with people. We get short tempers and bad moods and this ends up hurting our relationships with everybody—coworkers, friends, neighbors, but especially family members. If we bottle up our anger and bury it, it always, always leaks and somebody is going to suffer.

The opposite of a bottler is a spewer. These people don't have any problem at all in showing their anger. No problem just letting that anger fly. The anger just flows out of them because they're not about to bottle it up. If they have to slam the door and kick the dog, and curse their spouse or even God in order to let off steam, they'll do it. It doesn't matter if they leave a trail of bruised people in their wake.

The writer of Proverbs knew how much damage a spewer can do. That's why he wrote, "Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads, or you may learn their ways and entangle yourself in a snare" (Proverbs 22:24-25, NRSV). This kind of spewing can rub off on us and start a chain reaction of violence. That's why Proverbs tells us that only "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but the wise quietly holds it back" (Proverbs 29:11, NRSV). Spewing is dangerous business.

You see, there are alternative ways of managing our anger. Let's talk about God's way to manage anger so that life can work.

First, acknowledge that you are angry. "Managing anger God's way. 1. Acknowledge the anger." You see, anger isn't good or bad. Anger is simply an indicator that something isn't right. Anger is like the warning light on the dashboard warning lights of a car that tells us that something under the hood of the car needs attention. If we don't pay attention to that something, if we sit there looking at that little red or yellow light, nothing is going to change. Some people need a professional Christian counselor to work through deep issues of anger. Others of us need to become better at reading the warning lights in our minds and bodies. Notice the warning lights: clenched jaws, increased heart-rate, racing thoughts, heat under your collar. Because the sooner we can realize that what's going on inside of us is anger, the sooner we can begin to learn from it. And once we acknowledge our anger then we're able to answer the "Why?" questions.

That's the second step in managing anger God's way. "2. Figure out why." You see, this goes way beyond that external event that made us angry. That's easy. Somebody might say, "I get angry when single moms are taken advantage of when they take their cars to get fixed." Or maybe it's, "I get angry at my spouse when he or she makes financial decisions without talking to me." Or, "I'm angry because my boss withholds information from me about what's going on in the company." Or, "I get angry because my father never listens to me." Or, "I'm angry because I'm stuck in a traffic jam." These are the events that made us angry but something more is going on and we need to find out what that is.

What does this process look like? Let's look at the person who gets angry when single moms are taken advantage of when they're getting their cars fixed. The source of that anger isn't the event but the belief that those in need should be protected. The anger we feel about that is a righteous anger that may lead to a response. I've heard of a couple churches that started a ministry based on this anger. They got a whole bunch of mechanics in their church together and started offering free repairs on cars for people in need.

What about the person who gets angry when a spouse makes financial decisions without discussing them? The external event that causes the anger is obvious, but what is the deeper cause of the anger? Maybe it's an assumption about who handles the finances best. Maybe it's about expectations in how they should communicate. Maybe there's a certain value system about how money should or shouldn't be used that's been violated. When the real issue is pinpointed then a real conversation can start. It may not be easy to come to an understanding, but at least the real source of the anger has been identified.

Then there's the woman angry at her boss who's keeping information from her. Maybe the internal trigger is a belief about how an organization should be run. If that's the case she should talk to her boss about it, maybe look for a job at a company with a similar view. Maybe she needs to accept that she works in a place where effectiveness isn't the highest value. Or maybe she doesn't really need to know the information she wants and it's really about a self-centered attitude she has that she needs to change in herself.

What about the young man who's angry because his father never listens to him? That's a pretty reasonable expectation that is being violated. What choices does that son have? He can try to initiate honest communication with his dad. If he needs help, he may need to get the advice of a Christian counselor and maybe even ask his dad to go with him to see that counselor. If these options don't work he may have to go through the process of grieving that his father refuses to be a part of an authentic relationship. This is hard stuff, but sometimes there's no other constructive way of working through anger.

And what about those of us who get angry when we get stuck in traffic jams. This is an illustration of circumstantial anger. It has nothing to do with injustice in the world. It's not a result of somebody mistreating us or taking advantage of us. It's one of those impersonal, unavoidable circumstances that tick us off because our agenda, our preferences, our schedules have been thrown off. And this makes us angry!

Let's talk about this, because this kind of anger is revolves around the belief that we have the right to have convenient lives. It's based on a belief that the world revolves around us and our schedules and our preferences.

Whenever we get angry we need to take a deep look inside, but when it comes to circumstantial anger—the anger that's our response to inconvenience, or a preoccupation with our own welfare, or an extreme sense of entitlement—looking deep at our motivations is a must! Our character growth depends on it.

None of us is immune from this form of anger, I know I'm not—just ask my wife when we have to stand in a line too long or have a flight delayed. We all need to be vigilant about dealing with our egos and our attitudes. God's truth and wisdom kind guide us through this stuff.

I had a situation happen a while back that showed me my potential for anger. It had been an exhausting day. I had two funerals that day and meetings all evening long. I knew I wouldn't get home until 9:30 or 10:00. I had a lot to do and very little time to do it. As I sat in my office working there was a knock at my door. A man walked in. I knew him a little, but not a lot. He just sat down and started talking. I came out from behind my desk and sat down across from him to listen. He began to ask questions about God and the Bible. I did my best to answer him, but I realized pretty quickly that he didn't really want answers, instead he just wanted to show off how much he knew. And he wanted to tell me why he didn't believe in God.

I have a special heart for unbelievers. I want to be with them to answer questions, but this guy was just playing games with me and I didn't have time to play games.

His questions shifted and turned on my preaching. He had downloaded some sermons from the web site and read them. Now, I know I'm not the best preacher in the world. But I try to put my heart and soul into it. He started to berate me! To tell me that he found my sermons boring.

I'm sitting there listening, trying my best to stay calm. I am not proud of the thoughts that were going through my mind. I wondered what the Staff Parish Committee would think if their pastor dragged somebody out of his office and got into a fistfight. I began to think of verbal responses. Harsh words aimed back at this guy. I could feel a change in my body. I feel my anger in my guts. This white hot sensation of rage.

As I calmly continued to talk to this guy, and as I was thinking all these angry thoughts, I began to hear God's whisper. It was saying something like, "Aaron, why are you so angry? This is a deeply hurting person. He's this way for a reason. Don't give him any more reason to stay this way by losing your temper. He's been beat up in life enough and you don't need to add to that."

Then I felt like God was saying something like, "Aaron, you're angry because you buried two wonderful people today. You're grieving, but he doesn't know that. You want to be alone, but he doesn't know that. You want to go home but can't. He doesn't know that."

I realized that I was angry because this guy had invaded my grief by being so trite. It was like God was saying, "Look closer at him. You're angry at him, but you have never looked in the eyes of someone who does not matter to me. You have never made eye contact with somebody that my son didn't die for. You're angry but he matters to me, please treat him like he matters to me. Please don't blow this one, Aaron."

That's hard to hear. This guy didn't have anything to do with my anger. He just happened to walk in at the wrong time...or maybe it was the right time. It listened for a while longer. He left and I went on with what I had to do. He later became involved in one of our most important ministries here at Saint Paul's. I doubt if that would have happened if I had lost my cool.

That situation showed me that I am so depraved. Under the right conditions, I am still capable of going from light to darkness. After 25+ of being Christian, my heart still needs so much work. I also learned what a difference it makes when I listen to God and let him address my distorted attitudes and twisted perspectives. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, I will sin in my anger. That's a fact I can't deny. But with God, I can have the power to have constructive anger management. I can get it right.

When we're angry, we acknowledge it, not bottle it up or spew it, we ask why we're angry, then we look at our options. "3. Look at the options." Here are few possibilities: 1. Recall Bible passages about anger. Bring them out from your spiritual toolbox and let them guide you. 2. Pray and ask God to give assistance with the crisis at hand. The Bible says, "You have not, because you ask not." 3. Bring to mind mature Christians who model healthy anger management and imagine how they'd handle the situations. Look at the options, pick one or two, and put them into play at that moment.

The best advice comes the Bible. "Be angry but do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26, NRSV). We can break out of old patterns of sin. Every time we find ourselves responding to the circumstances of life with anger, we have an opportunity to grow spiritually, develop character and honor God. It won't be easy, but managing anger is an important tool in making life work. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Bill Hybels for his book Making Life Work. It has been a fantastic resource for this series.