

## THE COMPASS

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### *Temper, Temper! Part 1*

## **The Four Food Groups of Anger**

Teaching Pastor Doug Brendel

It's pretty widely known, I think, that there are four food groups.

United States government scientists — nutritionists — established the four food groups nearly 90 years ago, as a matter of fact; and most people know the four food groups by heart: that would be coffee, popcorn, Coca-Cola, and Altoids.

You just consume them in sequence, pretty much around the clock, and you'll be OK.

Actually, no, that's not quite the official lineup of the four food groups.

But if you Google search for the food groups — I'll just save you the trouble of doing it yourself — you find conflicting reports.

It seems the four basic food groups morph over time, for one thing, depending on your age bracket.

According to some college students, the four food groups are beer, pizza, chips, and cereal.

For high schoolers, it's beef jerky, pizza, root beer, and video games.

So pizza seems to have continuing nutritional value after high school.

Different cultural areas have different food groups: in the Deep South it's beer, bread, beef and gravy — beef and gravy is one food group, together — and then barbecue rounds out the four food groups in the South.

And then here are the four basic food groups for the suburban housewife: sugar, salt, fat, and chocolate.

But regardless of what kinds of food I live on physically, my physical life is not all there is to me.

I am also an emotional being.

Every day, I put food on my plate to keep my body healthy — but what's on my emotional plate, keeping my emotions healthy? Keeping my mind healthy?

I can tell you, right now, what you're living on.

We may not consciously think in these terms very often, but in fact, we live every day on a steady diet of faith. A steady diet of hope.

Now I don't mean some religious kind of faith. And I don't mean some dreamy, Disney-movie kind of hope. I'm talking the kind of faith that's just everyday expectations, the kind of hope that's just regular old anticipation.

We anticipate the future. We imagine how things are going to be. We make certain assumptions about what's going to happen — in the next minute, the next hour, the next day, the next week.

Our emotions feed on certain hopes.

And we can look at our emotional plates and find four faith groups, just like there are four food groups represented on our dinner plates.

Now I want to introduce you to the four faith groups.

(And I don't know if this is good news or bad news — but they're all peas.

Not the little green veggies — I'm talking about the letter P.)

But here's the reason it's important for us to know and understand the four faith groups. It's about emotional nutrition.

Physically speaking, what if I contaminate one of your food groups?

What if there's some kind of bacteria growing in your burger? Your proteins are poisoned.

Doesn't matter if your carbs are totally fine — your proteins are polluted? You're going to be sick.

Now emotionally speaking — what if I contaminate one of your four faith groups?

What if suddenly, one of the categories of hope that you naturally live your life on — one group of expectations that you're subsisting on every moment of every day, whether you realize it or not — what happens if suddenly, there's poison in there?

Let's look at the four faith groups, and see for ourselves.

First there's a faith group I call "personal worth."

I have a simple, basic faith in myself. I have some degree of self-regard, a reasonable measure of self-respect.

I have basic human dignity. I assume I'm worth something in life.

Everybody has this fundamental "faith in self."

Even the person who seems to have no self-esteem still has the basic human quality of self-regard.

It's basic to human nature.

But most of us don't have the problem of low self-esteem. If we have a problem, it's high self-esteem.

In any event, we all have something from this faith group on our emotional plates: a sense of personal worth.

I see myself as having some value. At least as much value as the next guy.

But what happens if someone puts me down? What happens if someone demeans me?

What if somebody hits me? What if somebody attacks me verbally?

They're poisoning one of the faith groups on my emotional plate.

And then what happens?

I get angry.

Anger is the stomach ache I get when one of my faith groups gets poisoned.

And here's the thing about stomach aches.

I can't ignore a stomach ache.

It hurts.  
 It sidetracks my work.  
 It dominates my thinking.  
 It infects my conversations, it affects my relationships.  
 It signals that something is wrong that urgently needs fixing.

Same with anger.  
 When I'm angry, it's sidetracking me.  
 It's got my brain going in some different direction than it was going before I got angry.  
 It's affecting my conversations.  
 It's shaping my relationships.  
 And it says, Hey, there's something wrong here that urgently needs fixing.

But what do I do when I come home from some restaurant and an hour later I've got a stomach ache?

Do I get back on the road (all doubled over with pain) and return to the restaurant, talk to the manager (holding my stomach), track down the cook who cooked that meal, inspect the pantry for bad ingredients, contact a lawyer, file a complaint with the authorities?

No. My stomach is killing me. I have a problem inside me now. I have to deal with the problem inside me. At the moment, this is all I care about!

On the other hand, when someone puts me down or undermines my dignity or somehow trashes my sense of self-worth, and I get angry — what do I do?

I'll tell you what I tend to do.

I get back on that road.

I turn my attention toward the source of the poison.

I talk to other people about the person who did me wrong.

I start thinking about some level of revenge.

I start talking about some way to keep this from happening again.

I start figuring out a way to lash out, hit back, hurt the person who hurt me.

In other words, I start acting as if by poisoning that other person, the poison in my own stomach will somehow be healed.

But that never, never works.

It doesn't work for a stomach ache, and it doesn't work for anger.

What would make more sense for me to do with my stomach ache?

OK, we'll get there in a moment.

Before we do that, let's look at the second "faith group" on our emotional plates.

The first faith group is personal worth.

The second faith group — the second set of hopes and expectations I live with every day of my life — is the faith group I call "pursuit."

I assume I can pursue and achieve the goals that are rightfully mine.

Not that I go around setting insanely difficult goals — I'm just talking about the basic everyday goals of life.

I figure when my teenager gets home from school, I can stick him in the car and we can

go to Target and get him the black shirt he needs for band class.  
 When something interrupts my pursuit of this very simple goal —  
 like, my kid calls from school and says he'll be home late because he threw a spit wad  
 and had to stay after for detention —  
 or he gets home on time but he forgot about some big homework project that's going to  
 take all evening —  
 or maybe he gets home and we get in the car and I turn the key and the ignition just  
 goes *click* —  
 or we actually get on the road but there's an accident on Frank Lloyd Wright and I'm  
 stuck in traffic like two blocks from my own house —  
 or say we get to Target but they don't have any black shirts in my kid's size —  
 you get the idea here —  
 when something interrupts my pursuit of my goal, it's like poison on my plate.  
 I have this expectation of "pursuit" —  
 this innate faith that I can pursue and achieve my goals —  
 but it's been polluted.

And so now, instead of living by this very simple type of faith, consuming it happily and  
 enjoying life in a normal way — I have a stomach ache.

I'm angry.

I slam the phone, or I pound the steering wheel, or I cuss, or I give the salesperson a  
 hard time.

The stomach ache is inside of me — but I'm looking for remedies *outside* of me.

Now just like a food group has lots of different foods in it, this faith group called "pursuit"  
 has lots of different goals in it.

Some goals I'm not all that fixated on; other goals, I'm deeply committed to.

So when a low-grade goal gets frustrated, I don't get all that angry.

In reality, I can take my kid to Target today, or take him tomorrow, I don't really care.

But when a high-grade goal gets frustrated, I get furious. A goal I consider important. Or  
 a goal I feel entirely *entitled* to achieve. A lot of this is about my sense of  
*entitlement*.

For example, in my life — well, come to think of it, I'm embarrassed to tell you what  
 would qualify as a high-grade goal in my life.

When I think about it, and then I have to say them out loud, it's ridiculous the stuff I get  
 angry about simply because my pursuit of some goal was interrupted.

You know, my calendar really does turn out to be super-important to me.

I *can't* take my kid to Target for his band uniform tomorrow; band concert is *tonight!*

Why didn't you plan this out ahead of time? You are messing with my *schedule*,  
 and *this makes me crazy!*

OK, now that I've made a fool of myself — here's faith group #3: "principles."

I have a certain array of assumptions about what's right and what's wrong, what's  
 appropriate and what's not, what's important and what's not — these are my  
 values, the principles that make up my worldview, whether I'm conscious of them  
 very often or not.

I place a certain significant amount of faith in the principle of fair play. If I see or hear  
 about someone playing dirty, I feel angry.

I place a certain amount of faith in the principle of honesty. I hear a news story about someone lying and getting caught at it (a politician, for example), I feel anger toward them — and a vicarious revenge-sort of satisfaction when they go to jail for it.

The more important a value is to me personally, the more anger I feel when that principle is violated.

The closer a person is to me when they violate my values, the angrier I am.

The more responsible I feel for a person who contradicts my values, the more furious I become.

When my wife starts in on this thing about federal judges and parental rights — look, just don't get me started.

If my next-door neighbor says exactly the same thing, no problem.

But this person I've been identified with for 20 years? No way.

My faith, my expectation, my assumption, is that *my* view is correct, and the closer you are to me, the more fully you'll share with my view.

When you poison that expectation, emotionally speaking, I've got a stomach ache.

And the final faith group on my emotional plate is what I call "patching."

Fixing. Repairing. Making it right.

When I see that something has gone wrong, or is in the process of going wrong, my assumption — my natural expectation — my innate faith — is that I can take measures to patch it up, fix it, make it right.

I don't always ponder this consciously. It is typical of human beings to observe a situation, see how it's wrong, and take a step to right the wrong.

If you walk into your own living room and a lampshade is tilted, you won't think a thing about reaching out to set it straight.

But if you find that it won't move — and you look in there and find that someone has super-glued it in the wrong position — it's possible you'll have a bit of an anger response!

Your inherent faith in your ability to right a wrong has been contradicted.

Something from one of the faith groups on your emotional plate — the "patching" faith group — has been poisoned.

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Any pollution of the four faith groups can trigger an anger response in me.

Even the youngest child, very early in life, feeds off of these four faith groups — and demonstrates an anger response if any of them are contradicted.

But some of us have an additional problem.

Perhaps I've been subjected to so much poison, from such an early age, or so exclusively, and over the course of so many years, that my emotional system has been overwhelmed.

It's become toxic.

I have what psychologists call "toxic anger syndrome."

Anger is no longer simply triggered by the violation of one of my four faith groups.

Now it has become a *lifestyle* for me.

My *automatic* response, to *any* stimulus, tends to be angry.

Anger is habit-forming — and now it's almost as if my anger has taken on a life of its own.

We've all known people like this.

People who complain bitterly about things that we don't think of as being all that bad.

People who jump to angry conclusions about people and situations, long before all the facts are in.

People who use terms like "stupid" with high frequency: "that stupid guy at the grocery store"; "this stupid woman pulled out in front of me"; "I don't know what that stupid doctor was thinking."

The whole emotional system has become toxic.

Instead of feeding on faith — living with that automatic capacity for hope, that positive expectation that God originally builds in to every human being — they have come to feed on their anger.

And in many cases, toxic anger has physical ramifications.

Scientists tell us that long-term toxic anger can make people not only physically but also mentally ill.

It can actually shorten life expectancy.

We see it undermining marriages and parent-child relationships — and other relationships; they become alienated from people and wind up lonely.

It reduces people's ability to make sound decisions, so that their educational choices and vocational choices and financial choices get skewed — they move from path to path, from plan to plan — and their lives turn out diminished in significant ways as a result.

But even short-term bursts of anger can play out negatively in our bodies.

We've all felt this from time to time — getting so angry that it tells on us physically.

When I'm angry I clench my teeth in a certain way.

I'm generally trying not to say something I'll regret later — or yell and scream, which is what I feel like doing — I'm clenching my teeth to keep from doing some kind of violence; but my teenagers have come to recognize even the shape of my face in moments like these.

My kid will say, "Dad, what are you mad about?"

Anger has changed the shape of my face.

Some of us translate anger into headaches. Or high blood pressure. Or psoriasis. Or worse.

But frankly, the relational damage is at least equally important.

And since Jesus tells us over and over that the two most important things in life are loving God and loving people, and that the way to love God is to love people — I need to tune in to any issue that affects my ability to love people well.

My anger issues will affect my ability to love people well.

So it's vitally important for a number of reasons to understand what anger is, where it comes from, and how to deal with it.

Which is not all that easy. Because you know what? Most of us are way goofed up about anger.

Our thinking about anger is very wrong.

(1) We feel guilty about it. (2) We think it's some kind of sin.

Or (3) we feel it's someone else's fault. We think it lives somewhere outside of ourselves.

Or (4) we feel we can somehow just get over it, and it won't affect us.

But none of these assumptions turn out to be true.

Anger isn't something to feel guilty about, as if I'm the only one who's ever experienced it.

First, anger is universal.

Everyone gets angry.

Jesus did. Twice, he got angry enough to drive merchants out of the temple (**John 2:12-23; Mark 11:15-19**).

He got mad at the religious leaders — called them “snakes” and said they would be “condemned to hell” (**Matthew 23:33**).

Paul the apostle got mad in a debate with other religious leaders in **Acts 15**.

Do you realize there is no word in the English language for the opposite of angry?

The dictionary will tell you the opposite of angry is calm, but calm is the opposite of agitated, or turbulent.

Wives — when your husband says, “What are you mad about?”, what do you say? “I'm not angry!”

You don't say “I'm calm.” That means something different.

Anger is so universal, it doesn't even have an opposite in our language.

Anger is truly a biological response.

It is a response of the nervous system.

My body reacts in anger without my even having time to consciously interpret events.

You've heard of the “fight or flight” response.

This is an alarm system that comes built in to the human body; it's standard equipment.

The question isn't whether I will feel anger; I will.

The question is what I will do with my anger when I feel it.

Will I respond to my stomach ache by hunting for a lawyer?

Or will I deal with the stomach ache?

Next — a lot of us have come to believe that anger is a sin.

But it's not.

There was a point where Paul the apostle was trying to keep the Christians in the Turkish city of Ephesus to keep from clawing each other to death, and in part of his advice to them he quoted something King David had written centuries earlier, in Psalm 4.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4:26**, “**In your anger do not sin....**”

The way David put it was in a song; which became **Psalm 4** in our Bibles.

He's speaking kind of poetically, but his thinking is completely realistic and practical for us today.

Here's part of what he says:

**Psalm 4:**

**4 In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.**

He's angry at the way he's been treated, but he doesn't automatically go the revenge route.

Instead, he says, search your own heart, and be silent.

Recognize that the anger is inside of you.

The roots of anger are not in the person who did you wrong or the situation that frustrated you.

The psalmist David says we need to search *our* hearts.

We can go ballistic and take a machete to the person who did us wrong, but the most we can cut down are the branches and stems.

The roots will still be there, under the surface, and if we leave them untended, they will grow.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way, in his book entitled simply *Anger*:

"If your house is on fire, the most urgent thing to do is to go back and try to put out the fire, not to run after the person you believe to be the arsonist. If you run after the person you suspect has burned your house, your house will burn down while you are chasing him or her. That is not wise."

And the psalmist advises us to "be silent."

The solution is not in getting in someone's face and chewing them out for it, or going around yammering to other people about it.

This is a true story: a little kindergarten girl in Tennessee — ironically named Gracie — was standing in line at some event, waiting for a carriage ride around the town square, when two bigger girls ran up and got in front of her in line.

So Gracie said, real loud, "Lord, you saw that, too! Please help me keep my mouth shut."

OK, that's not quite the idea, but I think Gracie is going in the right direction.

Anyway, here we see that David is really going to employ the "silent treatment."

He's going to be silent.

He's going to search his own heart, quietly, and ask himself, "Why am I angry? What is the story I'm telling myself?"

Next he says,

**5 Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord.**

To "offer right sacrifices" meant to do the right thing, and to live above your feelings.

The prophet Samuel, the old man who anointed David to be king, had once said, "...**To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams**" (1 Samuel 15:22).

In other words, live by God's design; don't just go with your emotions of the moment.



And then “trust in the Lord,” David says.

I could easily trust in my own power to get revenge, or force someone to behave differently — but even if I succeed, it’s not going to taste good.

It’s not what God designed me for.

**Romans 12:19** tells me that God is the only one who will succeed in the vengeance business; I’m designed for mercy.

Then David says,

**6 Many are asking, “Who can show us any good?” Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord.**

The people in David’s world were not really helping.

He was angry, and they were stoking his fire.

They were saying, “The world is a rotten place.”

But David’s response is to shift his perspective.

Instead of looking to his negative friends and going with that flow, David wants to be part of what God is doing in the world.

He wants to experience the light of God’s face — and this is a light that *reflects*.

David is asking God to let him become a positive force in this situation, and in the world around him.

I think David knew that anger could easily become sinful — but it also has the potential to produce good. To be constructive. To set the stage for health and growth.

This is what David was pushing for.

**7 You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.**

He’s turned the corner! He started out angry, but he used the silent treatment, he stepped out of himself, he got above his feelings, he trusted God to be his source — and now he can relax.

He has a clear conscience.

**8 I will lie down and sleep in peace, he says, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.**

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In the next three weeks, we’re going to look at those situations when your anger really is justified.

We’ll look at the power of venting.

We’ll look at what to do if anger has become a habit for you.

We’ll look at relationships that have been damaged by anger, to see if they can be reconciled and repaired.

But the first step is recognizing where anger lies.

*It lies inside myself. It’s a stomach ache.*

And recognizing why I feel it.

*I feel it because one of my four faith groups has been poisoned. My expectations have been contradicted.*

And recognizing why it’s dangerous.

*It's dangerous because it's habit-forming — and the longer I practice the habit, the more damage it will do to myself and to others.*

But maybe most importantly, I need to recognize not that anger is a sin, but that anger is a signal.

It's a signal that I need to turn to God.

I need to look to him for wisdom, for comfort, for the stamina to be patient, for the character to let him do any punishing that needs doing — while I do what I'm wired to do: reflecting his nature, doing his thing, the thing that he designed me to thrive doing: loving him, and loving people.