

THE COMPASS

Phoenix, Arizona

Wednesday, January 18, 2006

Temper, Temper! Part 3

The Good Kind of Anger

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Maybe you've seen cartoons like this, where you have a tiny little angel sitting on one shoulder, and a tiny little devil sitting on the other shoulder.

The devil whispers evil thoughts in one of your ears, and the angel whispers holy thoughts in the other.

This is not exactly a strict biblical representation — but in a way it does depict the struggle we experience.

Say I get into a difficult situation with someone and I'm in a position to respond to them, and it seems like there are two competing voices in my head, suggesting options to me.

One voice is saying, "Enter into a meaningful dialogue."

The other voice is saying, "Kick him! *Kick him again!*"

But here's the real difficulty with my little angel and my little devil, these two competing little influences that I can't seem to shake.

They're identical twins.

Sometimes, I can't tell them apart. Can't tell one voice from the other. Can't distinguish which one is the good guy, and which one is the bad guy.

Have you ever known identical twins? They don't just look alike. They *sound* alike. You get one on the phone, you can't be sure which one you're talking to.

Especially if they don't *want* you to know. If they're playing a joke on you or something, and they want to fool you? They can do it, no problem.

And I find that there are many, many situations where my little devil masquerades as a little angel.

I can have a whole conversation with the devil, thinking I'm talking to the angel.

I'm out someplace socially, and an acquaintance of mine, a married guy, starts making remarks, putting his wife down.

I hear a little voice in my ear that says, "Look at how that guy is treating his wife! That is reprehensible behavior!"

Yeah, I know. Wow, what a jerk.

"His wife is a friend of yours. Doesn't this just make you furious?"

Yeah, it does. I hate to see him doing this to her.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Well, uh, I don't know....

"This is wrong. This is just wrong. You've got to talk to somebody about it."

I do? I'm not sure.

"Tell his friends what he's doing. They'll straighten him out."

I don't know. I mean, he's really making me mad, but I'm not sure it's my place to...

"This isn't just anger! This is righteous indignation!"

Righteous indignation?

"What he's doing is sinful! You're angry because he's obviously sinning! Now you go tell his friends what he's doing, and get them to gang up on him. It's only right!"

OK ... I guess ... Hey, wait a minute. Who is this?

"What do you mean, Who is this? I'm your little friend."

Yeah? Which little friend?

"You know ... the good one. The nice one."

Oh yeah? What color are you wearing?

How do I know when righteous indignation is really righteous, and when it's really just anger?

Is there ever a time when I'm justified in feeling angry, because something is genuinely wrong or bad or inappropriate?

What are the situations where I *should* feel angry?

If someone is hurting my kid, that makes me mad. Shouldn't I be mad?

If I'm in business and someone steals my customers, that makes me mad. Shouldn't it make me mad?

If I elect a leader and that leader turns out to do stuff that complicates the work of our church, that makes me mad. Shouldn't it make me mad?

How can I tell whether I'm hearing from the angel or the devil?

The first step has to be an understanding of what makes God angry.

If it's righteous anger, and God is the only one who's truly righteous, then we need God's anger as a model for our own anger.

But God doesn't get mad the way we do.

Actually, the idea of God being angry is what's known as an anthropomorphism.

This is where you attribute a human-type quality to someone or something that's not human.

When a poet says the sky is angry, that's an anthropomorphism.

In the same way, when we say God is angry, we're assigning him a human-type quality as a means of understanding him.

God doesn't get angry like we do because he's omniscient — all-knowing.

Being omniscient means he is never surprised — never disappointed like we are — so God does not get angry like we do.

But here's what *does* happen.

Our actions impact the way we experience our relationship with God.

When I deliberately ignore him — or when I say one thing and do another — my relationship with God is hindered.

I've stepped out of his design for my life, and now I'm experiencing something other than the ideal.

I'm not experiencing the "abundant life" that he intends for me; I'm experiencing something less.

And in this way, I can say, “God is angry with me.”

This is my perspective, standing down here and looking up: God is angry.

Looking down from above, from God’s perspective, the situation is very different.

From his perspective, he was trying to help me, and I refused his help.

He was trying to give me a better life, and I said no, and now my life isn’t better at all.

In the process of my rejecting God’s design for my life, I’ve reaped problems.

God’s heart is aching for me to trust him.

His heart is aching for me to do what he suggests — to obey him.

His heart is angry at my sin.

It’s the same kind of anger that a parent feels against the cancer inside his child.

This is not a *Look how you’ve hurt me* kind of anger.

This is an *All I want is for you to be well* kind of anger.

It’s the passion of love. A passion that hates to see someone being hurt.

Completely motivated by love. Completely wanting what’s best for someone else.

Completely yearning for true *life* for that person.

That’s God’s anger. That’s righteous anger.

When Pharaoh was torturing the people of Israel, God demonstrated righteous anger.

Furious at Pharaoh — and yet, he gave him chance after chance after chance.

We all know the story of Sodom and Gomorrah — God’s righteous anger in action! —

but we rarely remember the angels God sent in ahead of time to warn people to get out of town.

When Jonah tried to run from God, God exhibited righteous anger — he wanted Jonah to bring redemption to the people of Nineveh, and Jonah wouldn’t do it.

But by the time God was finished, he had brought redemption to both Nineveh *and* Jonah.

God’s purposes are always redemptive — regardless of his methodology.

What looks like God’s anger to us will always have redemption as its ultimate objective.

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If I want to be sure my anger is righteous like God’s anger, what will I get angry about?

If we looked back through history for examples of God getting angry, what would we find?

Exodus 34:6 would tell me that God is “**slow to anger**.”

The book of Psalms would tell me God’s anger lasts only “**a moment**” (**Psalm 30:5; 103:8; 145:8**).

I would find that God gets the angriest, and gets angry the most often, over something the Bible calls “**idolatry**.”

This is nothing more or less than people trusting someone or something else, instead of God.

When God is prepared to give me absolutely everything I need, and I go looking somewhere else, I’m wasting my time and energy — I’m creating problems and disappointments for myself — and that makes him angry.

I find God getting angry at Moses for making excuses (**Exodus 4:14**) — because

Moses was selling himself and people of Israel short.
 Impeding the good work that God wanted to do in them and through them.
 I find God getting angry when people don't accept God's provision (**Numbers 11:1**).
 When they act as if God's provision isn't worth anything (**Joshua 7:1**).

I find God getting angry when someone mistreats poor people (**Isaiah 3:14,15**), or lets them fend for themselves just because they're poor (**Jeremiah 5:28,29**).

I find God getting angry — over and over and over again — when people lack compassion.

When they ignore people in need.

When they treat someone who has a need as if they're second-class. Or as if they're somehow dangerous. Or as if they're somehow unworthy of love just because they don't have as much money.

I find God getting especially angry at people who use religion to keep people from connecting with him.

God gets angry when anybody does anything that hurts someone or turns their heart away from God.

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So — what about me?

Can my anger be righteous, like God's is?

Probably not.

The odds are against me.

Chances are, my anger is not righteous.

When I feel angry, I need to recognize that I may very well be in the wrong.

This, frankly, is the likeliest scenario.

When God set out to express his design for life in the pages of the Bible, he didn't devote pages and pages to advice like "Be sure to get angry when it's valid!"

"Don't forget to get really mad when people are really bad!"

He knew this wouldn't be my big problem.

My big problem is getting angry for no reason, or for some lame reason, or for the wrong reason.

I get angry and I want to lash out and get revenge and so forth.

So God's wisdom for me goes in the other direction.

Psalm 37:8 says, "**Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil.**"

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

Anger means I've made a judgment. I've decided someone is guilty.

And my nature is to expect, and extract, justice.

In my emotional life, there's a very short line between crime and punishment. My fuse is short.

My feeling of anger very easily leads me to a relationship-altering decision about that person — I say or do something that could wreck our relationship, or end our

relationship, or at the very least alter our relationship dramatically.
 So God says, Doug, just don't go there. Don't get in the anger habit.
 Sure, it's possible that my anger can be godly. But it usually won't be.
 Sure, it's possible that my anger can be caused by my wanting what's best for someone
 else — that's the definition of love — but generally, my anger is going to spring
 from my own fear or insecurity or lack of trust in God as my provider.

So when in doubt, doubt the validity of your anger.
 Godly anger is rare. Fleshly anger is common.

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You know what? When I get angry, there's a test I can give myself if I want to know
 whether my anger is righteous or not.
 This is the same test you give yourself when you're on vacation and you wonder
 whether the directions you followed were correct.
 When you get out of the car, where are you?
 If you expected to wind up at Yosemite National Park, and you get out of the car and
 you're in Nogales, bad directions.
 In the same way, if I'm angry at you, I can tell if my anger is righteous by *where it leads*
me.

Righteous anger leads to righteous actions.

Does my anger lead me to punch you in the nose? Not righteous!
 Does my anger lead me to badmouth you behind your back? Not righteous!
 Does my anger lead me to plot ways of hurting you?

I'll just confess — this is the where my anger leads me most often.
 I don't think of it in these terms, but this is what's happening.
 Even someone I dearly love — take my teenager, for example.

Let's say she makes a smart remark to me, especially if it's in front of my friends, I'm
 embarrassed.

So I "correct" her — I'm giving myself lots of credit here: "correcting her" sounds so
 mature and responsible.

Probably I've screamed at her, or sent her to her room, or grounded her for life.
 But anyway, now the incident ought to be finished.
 She was clearly in the wrong; I was clearly obligated to "correct" her somehow.

But my anger hasn't subsided.

I'm still angry about a crime for which the trial has already taken place, the verdict has
 been announced, the sentence has been handed down — case closed.

And what happens now, when the doorbell rings, and it's my daughter's girlfriend from
 down the street, wanting to talk to her?

I could say, "I'm sorry, she's not available."

But no. My mind instantly contrives a plot to hurt my daughter.

And out of my mouth comes something like, "You know what? Your friend sassed me in
 front of a room full of people, and I sent her to her room like a six-year-old. So
 no, she can't talk to you now, because she doesn't have control of her mouth."

What I'm demonstrating is the fact that righteous anger isn't determined by the situation that made me angry in the first place.

The person who made me angry may have been totally in the wrong. Totally sinful.

Totally a teenager.

I may correctly perceive that behavior as unrighteous.

And still my anger toward that behavior is not righteous — if my own subsequent behavior is not righteous.

Anger is the journey — but what's the destination?

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Let's pretend for a moment that I'm a really good guy. (I know this is a stretch, but work with me here for a minute.)

And let's use gossip as a kind of test case, because this is really common.

People are saying negative stuff about other people all the time.

OK — so, I hear somebody gossiping about somebody else in the church.

Let's say they're gossiping about someone on the pastoral staff.

Putting him down behind his back.

Pastor did something I didn't care for. Made a bad decision. Gonna alienate people that way. Gonna hurt the church.

In fact, it's like they're campaigning for election, trying to collect votes for their position.

You either take their side, or you're the enemy.

In other words, this kind of gossip is literally splitting the church.

Pitting part of the body against another part of the body.

I see this, and it makes me angry.

This is wrong. It is clearly wrong.

My heart breaks for the church.

My heart breaks for the one spreading the poison, because I see the pain in their life.

So I approach that person privately, I try to find a way to get a dialogue going between that person and the pastor they've targeted.

I am angry, but my anger is righteous.

My anger is motivated by love for both parties, and my anger is leading me to act in righteous ways.

Righteous anger.

Now someone else gets wind of what's going on.

Hears the gossip, gets buttonholed by someone campaigning for votes.

They see it's wrong. Clearly wrong.

It makes them angry.

They go on kind of a tirade, about how Christians are hypocrites, and church leaders are no-good crooks.

Or maybe they go straight to the one who supposedly started the rumor, and challenge them. Draw a line in the sand.

You cut this out, you back off, you apologize, or I'm gonna get you kicked out of this church.

They're working on strategies so their team can win.

Or maybe they just quit the church; you call them up and ask them what happened and

they won't tell you, you just get the silent treatment.
 They are angry — but their anger is not righteous.
 They're not motivated by love for all the parties involved.
 And their actions are hurtful, not righteous.
 So this is not righteous anger.
 Same situation — two different responses.

What defines righteous anger?

Motive and results.

If my motive is love, and the results lead me and the people around me closer to God
 and to his design for life, then my anger was righteous.

“Love does no harm to its neighbor,” Romans 13:10 says. “Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

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But since we're imperfect in our understanding of God and God's ways, sometimes we
 will disagree about what's loving and what's not, what's harmful and what's not.
 One guy living in Massachusetts in 1776 might love God and truly want to live by God's
 design, and he feels the English government is starving his family.

He's responsible to God for the well-being of his family; he feels the government will
 never let them live.

He says, “I've got to go to war.”

His next-door neighbor attends the same church, loves God just as completely, wants to
 live by God's design just as much as the first guy. His family is suffering just as
 much as the people next door.

But he feels it can't be right to go to war.

Down through human history, some have taken up arms in the name of God.
 Some have engaged in passive resistance and civil disobedience in the name of God.
 Some have strapped on bombs in the name of God.

Some have won wars in the name of God.

Some have lost wars, still fighting in the name of God.

We can't judge righteousness on the basis of who wins and who loses.

Only God can judge righteousness.

I have to judge my own righteousness by looking in God's mirror for myself.

You have to judge your own righteousness by looking in God's mirror for yourself.

I have to do what God tells me to do, you have to do what God tells you to do, and we
 both have to live with the consequences.

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Now, if you get hurt by someone, I like to tell myself that I'm taking up your offense, then
 my anger must be righteous anger.

If you've been wronged, and I feel angry about that situation, then I'm a good guy,
 because I'm being offended *for* you.

I mean, come on; I'm not supposed to just ignore your situation, your pain, your
 problem, am I — just because anger is so dangerous?

If someone has wronged you, isn't it righteous for me to take up your cause?
I could even punish them on your behalf — there's nothing in it for me; I'm just feeling
righteous anger on your behalf.

Right?

There's a subtle problem with this line of reasoning, though.

It's the problem of *perspective*.

I can never see your situation with 100% clarity.

The fact is, I can never see my own situation with 100% clarity — **Jeremiah 17:9** tells
me that my own heart will keep fooling me about what's true and what's not — so
God has made me responsible for the conduct of only one individual: me.

This is more than enough responsibility for me.

It's hard enough to see my own sin, my own pride, my own shortcomings — hard
enough to calculate when someone has wronged me vs. when I'm just being
thin-skinned — hard enough to determine when I should take action and when I
should sit tight and wait.

And as foggy as my perspective of my own situation is from day to day, it's even foggier
when it comes to your situation.

You may tell me how this person wronged you, and how legitimate your claim is — but
in a difficult, emotional situation, I can't realistically trust your take alone on the
situation.

At the very least, I would need to sit down with the other guy too, and hear his side of
the story.

And even then, sorting out your conflict is not my job.

If I happen to be in a position of authority with both of you, or in a position of influence
with both of you, and I happen to be such a strong and mature and well balanced
person that I can navigate all this treachery, then maybe — just maybe — I can
help the two of you get a dialogue going, and do it all without sinking into some
destructive kind of attitude or judgmentalism myself.

But frankly, I don't see that happening very often.

Not in my life.

And not in other people's lives.

What I observe is that the best course of action is to be wary of offenses taken by
anybody, for any reason.

To be skeptical of an offense being legitimate.

To be uneasy about the energy it requires to for anyone to be offended about anything.

Starting with me — but also in others.

You have witnessed this many, many times.

Here's Mary. She stupidly says something thoughtless and unkind.

Susie's heart is broken.

I can easily take offense for Susie.

I want to punish Mary, or at least see her punished.

This happens all the time.

You hurt my friend, I hurt you. You make my daughter cry; I make you cry.

My motive starts out pretty good: I love Susie and don't want to see her hurt.

But here's that very, very short line again, between crime and punishment.
 The action I take is counter-productive.
 The action I take is destructive — not righteous.
 This isn't love. This isn't righteous anger.
 This is another old-fashioned word: sin.

See, I'm off-base in a few different ways.
 Mary didn't hurt me; she hurt Susie. So I have no right to punish Mary.
 But even if Mary had hurt me instead of hurting Susie, I have no right to punish Mary.
 Forgiveness means giving up my right to judge and punish the person who hurts me.
 And forgiveness is what God calls me to.
 He's in the judgment business.
 I'm in the mercy business.
 That's the way he designed me to thrive.
 I don't have enough information, I don't have clear enough perspective, I don't have
 enough balance or maturity to judge accurately, so I can't administer the
 punishment legitimately.

What should I do instead?
 When someone is hurt, and I feel the anger rising within myself on their behalf?
 I need to hurt for them. Hurt with them.
 I need to "truth squad" my own response: are my actions exclusively about bringing
 good out of the situation?
 Inclining the various parties toward God's design for the situation?
 In his Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 7:4,5**, Jesus asked, "**How can you say to
 your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time
 there is a plank in your own eye?**"
 This is essentially hypocritical, he said.
"First take the plank out of your own eye," he concluded, **"and then you will see
 clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."**
 So when someone upsets me, the first place I should look is not to the gun locker — not
 to the boxing gloves — not to the culprit.
 The first place I should look is inside myself.

It will take a whole lifetime of training for me to really get this nailed down:
 Desire for punishment doesn't qualify as righteous anger.
 Passion for restoration — now *that* is authentically righteous anger.
 This is why **Galatians 6:1**, as we saw last week, says the person caught in a sin should
 be "restored," and "gently."
"But watch yourself" in the process, it goes on to say, **"or you also may be tempted."**
 See, I am never more than a step away from my anger going off the righteousness
 track, and into the unrighteousness ditch.

In fact, **James 1:19,20** says my anger will hardly ever produce righteousness.
"...Take note of this," he says: **"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak
 and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the
 righteous life that God desires."**
 In the same way that I can't love authentically and totally unless God's love is coursing

through me into the life of that other person, I also can't be angry righteously under my own power.

God's anger is the only anger that brings about true righteousness.

And true righteousness is the only outcome that qualifies as real success.

If I want to be successful in life — I'm not talking financially, or socially, or whatever; but successful by God's definition, in the truest possible way — then I need to be sure that my anger is God's anger, and not my own.

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OK, then, one more question.

If I feel the anger rising up inside me, and I wonder whether it's righteous anger or wrongful anger — whether it's the little angel whispering to me, or the little devil — but I don't have time to go back and look up my notes from this message — is there a default position I can fall back on?

I think there is.

Proverbs 15:1 says, **"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."**

I think our default position should be to love as fully as possible. To avoid administering pain as much as possible.

In the same way that a parent only administers "tough love" when it's the only way, we should only apply pain as an expression of love when it's the only way.

If I can surrender myself to God's design, and just love people with his love as often as possible, as deeply as possible, as completely as possible, it will be hard to go wrong.