

## THE COMPASS

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### *Temper, Temper! Part 4*

## **The Country With Only One Citizen**

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Who's mad at you?

I don't mean just at the moment.

I mean think about the most toxic, anger-filled relationship you've had in your life.

Some of us would apply that description to a spouse, or a parent, or a child.

Some of us would say that a relationship with a former employer or employee was the most toxic in your life.

I'm not necessarily talking about the kind of relationship where there's yelling and screaming, although that certainly could be part of it.

But sometimes the most anger-infused relationships are totally silent.

Communication is finished.

There's just the memory of it, and the fuming about it, maybe kind of a sick-at-your-stomach feeling when you think about it.

I couldn't think about this subject without automatically making a list in my head of people in my own life with whom I've had what I would define as an "anger-filled relationship."

Situations where the two of us just somehow descended into so much frustration and disappointment and rage that the relationship just became impossible.

In some cases I just walked away. In some cases it was the other person. In most cases it was just a mutual withdrawal. Two people deciding not to fight anymore.

We didn't do anything about the anger. We just disengaged, and kept our anger to ourselves.

But that's not the last chapter in these stories.

As I thought about it, I realized that in every one of these cases, disengaging from that relationship had more than just the obvious effect.

It also had side-effects.

One side-effect was the ripple effect.

I find that the person I disengaged from wasn't living in a soundproof box.

That person had a life, had friends and family, had a lot of people to tell their side of the story to.

So instead of just losing one relationship, I lost a whole raft of relationships.

Suddenly, all the people in that person's circle, I had to figure out if they were still in my circle or not.

The wife is mad at me; can I still be friends with the husband?

The boss is mad at me, and I'm not working there anymore; can I still be friends with my old buddies from the office?

What has the person I'm in conflict told the people around them?  
 How truthful was it? How much did they believe?  
 I disengaged from the conflict — at least I thought I did — but there's still conflict aplenty for me to sort through and deal with.  
 And in some of those cases, the price was enormous.  
 Multiple relationships wound up damaged, or ended entirely, because of my inability or unwillingness to resolve the conflict with one person.

Another side-effect of disengaging from that conflict was the bubble effect.  
 My anger was trapped inside the bubble of my own heart, my own life.  
 I had no place to lay it down.  
 I had to keep carrying it around, or deal with it myself.

And then there have been anger-filled relationships that didn't disintegrate; they continued.  
 The anger isn't so intense that two people disengage — instead, they *stay* engaged, and live in the pain.  
 They don't deal with their anger. They just keep nurturing it. They come to expect it, in the context of this relationship.  
 We hear phraseology all the time that signals this kind of lifestyle: "Oh, my mom makes me crazy." "My boss is insane." "One of these days I'm going to kill that guy."  
 The anger-filled relationship becomes a fact of life, and both parties are suffering all the damaging consequences of endless anger.

What if someone decides they want to reconcile that relationship?  
 Is it possible, and if it's possible, how do you start?  
 You know, I really want there to be some magic trick I can play to make it happen.

Well, I'm going to make what you may consider to be a radical proposal.  
 I'm going to propose that you employ magic.  
 Now, before you freak out, let's look at the dictionary definition for *magic*.  
 The primary definition calls magic "the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces."  
 I don't believe we can "use" God's power — we can only surrender to God's love, and witness his power at work, as he sees fit.  
 But I also believe that the longing of God's heart is for our anger-filled relationships to be reconciled, and if we do surrender to his love, we will witness his power at work toward that objective.  
 The dictionary says it might be "mysterious" — and I think this is true, too.  
 If we go down this road, it's going to feel mysterious, because it's so unusual. It's so uncommon. It's such a strange and rare thing to see an anger-filled relationship reconciled.  
 Most of us, when we find ourselves in such a situation, just languish there.  
 But when we move from the place of our own weakness to the place of employing the power of God's love, something mysterious and fabulous and beautiful can happen.

So this — if you won't consider it too sacrilegious — is a magic lesson.  
If you want to get a picture of the storybook brand of magic, you look at the famous story of Peter Pan.

What is the hypothesis of Peter Pan?

That if you "only believe," then you can fly.

If you "only believe," magic can happen.

We know this isn't true, but I do believe there are words you can say that — if you truly believe them — the "magic" of reconciliation can begin.

I'm going to give you three phrases. Three "magical" statements.

Just saying them won't accomplish a thing.

But if you can say them and truly believe them, I believe you'll be opening the door for God to do something supernatural in that difficult, anger-filled relationship.

Here's statement #1: **"I did it."**

You're saying, I own the problem between us.

I own my anger.

Now this is already going to be a serious problem for many of us.

I'm thinking of an anger-filled relationship in my own life, and on the face of it, I would honestly have to say I didn't do it — he did it!

He should own the problem between us!

He's the cause of my anger!

Magic lesson, my eye!

I'm out!

This is not going to work, because this does not operate in the realm of reality.

That guy caused the problem, and clung to the problem, and he is still the problem.

Well, OK, then this anger-filled relationship is not a prime candidate for reconciliation.

Which is too bad — because how has it affected me all these years?

Well, it's hurt me. It's made me toss and turn at night. It's distracted me. It's diminished my productivity. It's complicated other relationships in my life — lots of other relationships. It's made me feel like garbage.

Don't I want this anger-filled relationship to be reconciled?

Well, yes, I do. But I want the other guy to do the work.

I want him to acknowledge his guilt.

I want him to come to me, hat in hand, tears in his eyes, head bowed, and beg my forgiveness.

What do I really want? I want him to play the part of the servant, while I play the part of the master.

Is this legitimate? Am I better than he? Is he subhuman?

Well, no. I'm imperfect too. God doesn't see his sin against me as any worse than my various other sins.

Maybe I think of myself as the "righteous" party in this relationship. But what does God see?

He looks at the spirituality thermometer and he sees that my supposed righteousness is

all the way up to the “filthy rags” level (according to **Isaiah 64:6**).

Yeah, but in this situation, the other guy is the guilty party and I’m the innocent party!

Oh, really. Is this true?

No. It is not true.

Two imperfect human beings made this problem.

If I had been totally, 100% godly in this relationship — in other words, if I were literally

God, because God is the only being in the universe who’s 100% godly — then the disagreement would not have taken place at all, because I would have wisely defused it, or mercifully allowed the offense, or supernaturally solved the conflict.

In any case, the only way I could qualify as the judge and jury in this case — the only way I could qualify as the person to mete out the punishment in this case — would be if I were God.

Since I’m not God, I can’t judge, and even if I do judge, I can’t punish.

The role I’m wired for is mercy. Community. Relationship. Love.

The reality is this: I brought half of the dynamic to the situation.

Right or wrong, I was a player.

And whether I see myself as the “right” one or not, I am not perfect.

My human flaws were part of the mix in this relationship, and that makes me part of the problem.

Now as if this weren’t bad news enough, I also have to own the anger. Not just the fact that the conflict occurred, but the anger that I have felt as a result.

I desperately resist this idea. I urgently want my anger to be the other guy’s problem.

He did me wrong. He made me angry. As if the emotion inside me belongs to him, and I’m stuck carrying it around.

He ought to take it away, and give me some peace!

But the truth is, my anger is my own.

I generated it.

I looked at the situation, I compared my expectations or values to what was happening in the situation, and I didn’t like the contrast between these two competing views.

The difference between what I wanted and what I observed generated some heat in me, sparked a spark in me, and set some of my own fuel on fire.

What’s burning is my own heart. My own mind. I’m on fire. The anger is my own.

I have to acknowledge this.

I have to own my anger.

I have to establish in my own mind that my anger is something I have generated and I need to deal with.

The other person may have done terrible stuff, but I could have chosen any one of a hundred ways to respond.

It was something in *me* that chose the anger path.

Maybe it seemed justified — maybe, technically, it *was* justified — but still, I chose anger.

**Jeremiah 17:9** says, “**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure....**”

I will tell myself my anger is warranted, and I couldn’t help it, and just about anything else to justify myself to myself.

But even if felt involuntary, the fact is that I have stayed with the anger.  
 This is an “anger-filled” relationship, after all.  
 Anger has marked this relationship for some time.  
 I’ve had time to figure something else out, some other way to handle it.  
 But I haven’t. I’ve stuck with it.  
 I have to own my anger.

Some have said that anger is like a crying child. It has to be picked up and held; it has to be embraced and soothed.  
 This is work that I am in a way better position to accomplish than the guy who quote-unquote “made me angry” in the first place.  
 If anger is indeed a stomach ache, the way we described it three weeks ago, then I need to administer healing — not just curse the pain.  
 The Buddhists wisely distinguish between the anger you feel and the person you’re in conflict with.  
 One Buddhist writer puts it this way: “Your anger is not your enemy, your anger is your baby.”  
 In a way, this represents the beginning of good advice.  
 When your baby pitches a fit, you don’t throw the baby out — much as you might like to. You attend to the baby. You figure out what’s wrong. The baby can’t care for itself. You have to care for the baby.  
 Why? Because the baby is yours.  
 In the same way, the anger is mine.  
 It can’t care for itself.  
 I need to own it, and attend to it, myself.

I think about that person I have an anger-filled relationship with.  
 What would happen if I said, “Hey, you know what? We have a real problem. I have been really angry.”  
 But I have come to realize that I did it.  
 I own this problem, and I own the anger I’m feeling as a result of it.  
 I want a good relationship with you again.”

The magic of such a declaration is that I’m increasing the value of the relationship. I’m saying I want a relationship with you more than I want you to take ownership of the problem.  
 You can stick it all on me, and I’m not going to concern myself with that.  
 You don’t have to be “fair.” You don’t have to be right or wrong.  
 I just want back in to the relationship with you, because that’s what’s valuable to me.  
 That’s what I’m wired for.  
 That’s what God created me to thrive on.

Of course I can’t just say it. I have to mean it. I have to really believe it.  
 It’s like Peter Pan says: “If you really believe, magic can happen.”  
 Not the false magic of an illusionist, or the black magic of a sorcerer, but the wonderful, delightful surprise that God brings about through the supernatural power of his love.

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Now here's the second statement I have to make, and really believe, if I want reconciliation in an anger-filled relationship:

**"I'm sorry I did it."**

Once I acknowledge that I own the problem, then I need to take the next step and regret it.

Here again, in those cases where I get past my own reluctance to own my own part in the problem, I have a terrible problem getting to step 2.

I may recognize my role in the conflict, and I may accept the fact that I chose anger as my response, and stuck with it — but I sure don't feel sorry about it.

I don't regret it — he deserved my rage, and my withdrawal from him, and it's his loss, and I'm glad I did it!

Of course, none of this acknowledges the reality that my anger is still burning me up. It's eating me alive, from the inside out.

Or it's festering like a sore that needs treatment.

My pride won't release me — so reconciliation gets hung up.

But man, if I can come to a place of regret, of remorse — if I can come to a place of wishing I hadn't responded the way I did — there is magic in that.

The clenched fist of my emotions finally relaxes, and my emotional muscles can finally begin to get the rest they so obviously need.

There is nothing quite like the power of "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry" has the potential to disarm the opponent.

It opens a seam and *pssst!* — lets the steam out.

Now I've read that I can use "I'm sorry" as kind of a verbal karate move — using the momentum of my opponent against them.

"When you agree with your opponent," one writer says, "you can leverage their motion to your advantage."

But this smells like hypocrisy to me.

I don't see Jesus leveraging his opponents' motion to his advantage.

I see him living in a way that said "I don't require advantage. I am not about winning. I am about serving. I am about loving. I am willing to take the loser's position."

Jesus recognized that authentic power for life lies in grace and servanthood and community.

He knew that the only authentic power is the power of God's love.

So in my anger-filled relationship, I won't get very far toward reconciliation if I see my apology as a mock-passive strategy for advantage.

I need to see apology as an authentic-power strategy for *disadvantage* — for *giving up* the advantage — to the person I've been in conflict with.

Jesus didn't leverage his opponents' motion to his advantage.

He leveraged his own disadvantage against their motion — letting love disengage their transmission and leave them spinning their wheels.

And in fact, even when they found new ways to attack him, he deferred to them.  
He let them drag him to trial. He let them lie about him and convict him illegally and sentence him unfairly.

He let them goad him all the way to the cross, and execute him.

He was saying what I need to say in my anger-filled relationship:

“I will humble myself, I will take the position of the loser, in order to restore relationship with you, because I consider relationship with you more important than winning over you.”

If I can say to that person I have such a horrible relationship with — “I did it, I own it, and I’m sorry I did it” — and really believe it, then God can take that horrible relationship and begin something wonderful.

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And then, there’s the third statement I have to say and really believe:

**“You don’t have to believe me.”**

This may be the biggest sticking point of all, at least for me.

If I’m going to make this supreme effort — if I’m going to lay down my pride and surrender myself so completely to God’s design in this relationship — then I sure want some return on my investment.

I want some kind of reward. Some kind of compensation from that other person.

But the truth is, when I imagine going to that person and owning the problem and saying I’m sorry, I also imagine the look on his face.

The tone of his voice.

The doubt in his eyes.

The smirk on his lips.

Or his very, very careful choice of words as he responds — which tells me he’s skeptical.

He doesn’t really believe me.

He thinks I have something up my sleeve.

He thinks I need something from him.

He thinks I’ve got some new problem-situation that has somehow driven me into a position where I more or less have no choice but to make up with him.

Or whatever!

How often have I used this phrase: “Oh, I know how he’ll react.”

How often have I talked myself out of taking a healthy tack with someone in a conflict situation, rationalizing my decision not to go there on the basis of how I just *know* they’ll respond — and whatever it is, of course it’s going to be ugly.

The Scriptures recommend that as part of loving God and loving people, I give people the benefit of the doubt — believe the best (**1 Corinthians 13**) — but I tell myself I know better.

I can predict the future, and the future is basically *more bad behavior* on the part of the person who has already behaved so badly.

I have even told myself — I confess — that I’m just not going to give that person an opportunity to act badly again.

Well, here I go again, playing God. Predicting the future.

And playing the devil, too: assuming the worst. Accusing the sinner.

I’m so off-base when I take this approach.

I’m not wired for this kind of judgmentalism.

I’m wired to love people *regardless*.

That other guy doesn’t have to believe me, or like me, or respond well to me.

People didn’t believe Jesus. They didn’t like Jesus. They didn’t respond well to Jesus.

And yet he kept loving them.

He’s my model. He’s the model of God’s design for life that I’m supposed to be following in order to get the most out of life.

So my challenge is to go back to that anger-filled relationship, and say to that person: I own the problem, and I’m sorry, and you don’t have to believe me.

In fact, you don’t have to do anything differently.

I’ll still love you.

I’ll still be sorry.

I’ll still own this.

The apostle Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 13:7** that love “**always protects.**”

The original term was the Greek word *stego*. It’s not exactly “protecting.” It’s more the idea that love can put up with anything.

Authentic love “takes a licking and keep on ticking.”

See, I can’t force anyone to forgive me.

This is why **Romans 12:18** says, “**If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.**”

Is it impossible? Sometimes, yes.

A husband keeps beating up on you.

An employee keeps stealing from you.

A relative keeps abusing you.

You have to take steps to protect the people you’re responsible to God for — your kids, your family, your employer, whatever.

But usually — truth be told — this isn’t my big problem.

Usually my big problem is, I don’t want to live at peace with that person.

I want to win. I want to be acknowledged as the victor. The good guy. The “righteous” one.

Even Jesus’ own disciples exposed this ugly underbelly of pride.

There was a day (in **Matthew 18**) when Jesus was talking with them about how to *avoid* anger-filled relationships — not how to reconcile after months or years of anger build-up, but how to nip it in the bud, at the very beginning.

He said the key is to go to the person right away, have a conversation, get to the bottom of it one-on-one if at all possible.

But the disciples didn’t say, “Oh, OK, that’s easy.”

They felt what you and I feel when somebody does us dirty — the last thing they wanted



to do was to go and lovingly engage this person in dialogue. Ick!  
 At the most, I want to confront the individual and rage and spew and intimate them and get them to wallow in fear and regret!

So Peter tries to weasel out by asking Jesus about a technicality:

**“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21).**

What he’s really suggesting is that he thinks he’s justified in writing somebody off if they don’t come around. If they don’t change to meet his standards.

He doesn’t want to say, “I am sorry, and I will love you even if you don’t believe me.”

He wants to say, “I am sorry, and I will love you as long as you believe me. As long as you accept my change of heart. As long as you experience the same beautiful kind of transformation that I’m now exhibiting to you.”

But this is not the world we live in — because people don’t often change like this.

Change is terribly difficult — we saw this when we talked about how to put out the fire of anger two weeks ago.

So what this means is: I have to be prepared to own the problem and feel remorse about it — in other words, do all the work of reconciliation alone — and then, on top of it all, maintain my position, *regardless of the results*.

Well, why should I?

If they’re not going to change, why should I bother?

Why should I work at this?

Well, I don’t have to.

You might say I live in a country that has only one citizen.

I am the one citizen.

God has put me in charge of this one tiny country.

I decide how to live. I can lay down the law in my country however I see fit.

I am the voting public. I have the majority in every election.

If I want to, I can elect God as my King; I can live by his law, if I choose to.

I can receive all the “government benefits” that he wants to provide for me.

But I’m not a citizen anywhere else.

God has not put me in charge of anyone else’s country.

I don’t have a vote in their country.

I can’t decide the laws that they live by.

I can’t elect God as their King, and I sure can’t elect myself as their king.

So I can only make decisions that will be best for me, in my little country.

When someone is furious with me, I can only cast a vote in my own little election, on the question of what I will do.

This is not about their response; it is about my response.

My position in the conflict.

My willingness to try God’s way.

My openness. My surrender.

And maybe most importantly, this is about my wholeness.  
 If a part of me holds back, my redemption isn't complete.  
 But on the other hand — and this is the truly magical part, the part that most people  
     never realize or experience — *I can be completely redeemed even when the  
     other person holds out.*  
 Because I live in a country with only one citizen.  
 And I can decide to make God my King.  
 I can receive the benefits of citizenship under his sovereignty if I so choose —  
     regardless of what the countries around me decide.  
 Jesus said (in **Luke 6:35**), “**...Love your enemies, do good to them ... without  
     expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great....**”

I don't often experience that “great reward” he talked about.  
 What I have experienced is that when I hold out because the other person is holding out  
     — or when I hold out because I believe the other person is going to hold out —  
     I'm the one who suffers. I'm the one who pays the price.  
 The other person may be suffering too, but I'm not living in that country.  
 I'm dealing with my own stuff.  
 I'm bearing the burden of my own unreconciled anger.  
 And it's tragic, because it's not necessary.  
 I could have healing.  
 I could be free of this.

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So will I go ahead and proactively pursue reconciliation in my anger-filled relationships?  
 And if the answer is no, why not?  
 The healing is available, and the healing is for me.

If I read further down in the dictionary, under the entry for the word *magic*, I find that the  
     word doesn't have just one definition.  
 Like many words, it has multiple definitions.  
 And the final definition for magic calls it “a quality that makes something seem removed  
     from everyday life, especially in a way that gives delight.”  
 That is the kind of magic I want to experience.  
 It's not an everyday thing. It's not a common thing.  
 Anger-filled relationships are tragically commonplace for me, and for most of us.  
 But what I want — and what God wants for me — is for me to let him remove me from  
     the everyday, by the supernatural power of his love, and to replace my anger-  
     filled relationships with something “that gives delight.”  
 Something delightful.  
 Something so like God.

The next step — the first step — is mine.