



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 When Love
Turns to Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 73-80)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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When Love Turns to Anger

We often reserve our severest wrath for those we love most. Uncontrolled anger ruins close friendships, destroys marriages, and severs the familial bond between children and parents, brothers and sisters. Why does our love so easily spawn terrible anger? And how can we cure this spiritual disease?

Prayer

Almighty God, you daily sustain us with good gifts,
and constantly draw us to yourself in love.
Teach us to know and adore you more completely,
and through that knowledge and praise
to see and embrace one another
as you see and embrace us in steadfast love.
Teach us, through your daily goodness and merciful love,
to deal rightly with our anger when we are offended,
and with our guilt when we have offended others.
In your holy name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray.
Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 22:34-40

Reflection

Is it so surprising that we often become angry with those we love? After all, they make easy targets. They “are most vulnerable to us and the easiest for us to hurt,” Dan Johnson and Adam Pelser note. “We are also most vulnerable to them and most willing to reveal the uglier sides of ourselves—for surely, we think, they will forgive us no matter how badly we treat them!”

Yet the alarming number of passionate, violent crimes and abuse between intimate partners, family members, and friends suggest that more is going on. Johnson and Pelser went searching for the “deeper sources for this pernicious, relationship-destroying anger.” They conclude “The disease of love turning to anger has a two-fold source that can be summarized in the popular slogans: ‘Love is God’ and ‘I have a right to be happy.’”

- ▶ “*Love is God*” captures our tendency to idolize the “natural loves” of affection, friendship, and erotic love. We seek ultimate happiness through them, rather than the spiritual love that the Christian tradition calls *charity* or *neighbor-love*, and are disappointed. “For example, when spouses expect love to make them happy and then find themselves unhappy, all too often they blame their beloved for failing to make them happy—and so begins the tragic story of countless divorced marriages,” Johnson and Pelser write. It’s a common pattern: we idolize the natural loves, expect too much from them, are disappointed, and blame those we love for our dissatisfaction. They think that “this explains why love gives way to a variety of negative emotions such as sadness, loneliness, depression, disappointment, and even some frustration and mild anger; however, it does not yet explain the extent of the anger felt and expressed toward those we purport to love.”
- ▶ “*I have a right to be happy*” is a slogan for the rest of the story. The emotion of anger arises from a concern for justice and noticing someone has wronged us, violated our rights, and thus deserves punishment. But, as Henry Fairlie points out, our perception of



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wrongdoing has become selfishly skewed and is on a hair trigger: “Any felt need or desire or longing, for anything that one lacks but someone else has, is today conceived to be a right that, when demanded, must be conceded without challenge. And if it is not at once conceded, the claimants are entitled to be angry.” Even minor inconveniences—slow traffic, mistakes in a restaurant order, glitches in software—*offend* us. Someone is to blame! Johnson and Pelsler write, “When we buy into the lie that we deserve—that is, *we have a right*—to be happy, we construe our unhappiness and disappointment in love as a violation of our rights and we angrily seek to punish the only offenders we can think to blame—the ones whose love for us...we expected to make us happy.”

This diagnosis suggests a twofold cure for the spiritual disease of love turning into anger. “We can be cured of our deeply felt conviction that we have a right to be happy by coming to possess an even more deeply felt conviction of our unworthiness because of sin and corresponding gratitude for every good thing as an undeserved, gracious gift from God—in short, by internalizing Christian teachings about sin and grace,” Johnson and Pelsler conclude. “We can be freed of our tendency to idolize both the people we love and our love itself by learning to love God most of all and to love others as God’s image-bearers and, indeed, as God’s beloved—in short, by obeying the two great commandments that sum up the Law and the Prophets.”

Study Questions

1. How are popular media—advertising, novels, television, films, and internet sites—encouraging us to idolize affection, friendship, and erotic love? Which love is most idolized?
2. Where do we get the idea that we have a *right* to be happy? Recall a minor inconvenience that made you angry recently. Who was the target of your anger?
3. Why, according to Dan Johnson and Adam Pelsler, is Søren Kierkegaard’s idea that God become the “middle term” in neighbor-love so important? How does it explain the proper relation between love of God and love of others?
4. How can your congregation combat the spiritual disease of love turning into anger?

Departing Hymn: “Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing”

Lord, dismiss us with your blessing;
fill our hearts with joy and peace;
let us each, your love possessing,
triumph in redeeming grace;
O direct us and protect us
traveling through this wilderness.

Thanks we give and adoration
for your gospel’s joyous sound;
may the fruits of your salvation
In our hearts and lives abound;
ever faithful, ever faithful,
to your truth may we be found.

John Fawcett (1773), alt.

Tune: SICILIAN MARINERS

When Love Turns to Anger

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To acknowledge the widespread violence and abuse perpetrated between people who love, or once loved, one another.
2. To consider how the spiritual disease of love turning into anger is fostered in our culture by idolizing love and wrongly believing that we have a right to be happy.
3. To discuss how your congregation can combat this spiritual disease.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Anger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing” locate the familiar tune SICILIAN MARINERS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Snapshot

The statistics are staggering. The occurrence of violence between people in a close relationship – current or former spouses, or dating partners – is called “intimate partner violence.” It can include physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological aggression occurring one time or repeatedly over a long term. In the United States almost 30% of women and 10% of men have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner. How many others have experienced psychological and emotional abuse by a partner? (“Understanding Intimate Partner Violence” [Center for Disease Control, 2014], www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-factsheet.pdf, accessed 19 October 2014)

When we widen the view to include such crimes perpetrated by family members (related biologically or through adoption), friends, and acquaintances, we discover that they account for a majority of all crimes, perhaps as high as 88% of all offenses reported to the police. And all of these numbers surely are low, because only about 60% of domestic violence is ever reported to police. (“Family Violence Statistics, Including Statistics on Strangers and Acquaintances” [Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005], www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvs.pdf, accessed 19 October 2014)

Many violent crimes, and many more instances of abuse, are committed between people who once loved or continue to love one another. In this study, we explore how human love so easily turns to anger.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 22:34-40 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study focuses on the inordinate anger that targets the persons we love. This emotion, along with the lingering distrust that it causes, can ruin our relationships with close family members and friends; in extreme

cases it may lead to acts of violence. Why is such anger so common today? Dan Johnson and Adam Pelsler discover two sources for it in our culture: our idolatry of love and confusion about individual rights. With this theory in hand, encourage members to critique the cultural roots of this spiritual disease of love turning into anger.

Study Questions

1. Form three small groups to brainstorm specific examples of how one of the loves is idolized in popular media.

To orient the thinking of the first group, explain that we can have *affection* for places, situations, and things, as well as for people. For instance, C. S. Lewis analyzes patriotism as affection for one's country. Like other affection, patriotism can become distorted. We can have inordinate affection for a town, place of work, way of life, or group, such that we do not want it to grow or change (e.g., due to immigration, influx of members with different goals, and so on). We can also have a grasping affection for a child, or pet, or particular possession.

Many relationships are eroticized in popular media; it can difficult to think of deep and abiding affection or friendship toward another person without making it sexual. That is one reason to think erotic love is the most idolized form of love in our culture.

2. Dan Johnson and Adam Pelsler write that "advertisers, politicians, journalists, educators, televangelists, and motivational speakers tell us that we have a right to whatever we feel that we need – indeed, that we have a right to be happy." When we misidentify happiness with moments of pleasure, we conclude that we have a right to feel good about ourselves and our situations all (or most) of the time. Thus, anyone who puts legitimate demands on our time or restricts our behavior is making us unhappy.

Encourage members to think of a specific minor inconvenience that raised their ire. Did it make them mad at a particular person (who was present or absent from the immediate situation), a group of people, a corporation, or God? How did they handle their anger?

3. Johnson and Pelsler ask, "How do we genuinely love and desire relationships with other people (as God has commanded us) without idolizing them and depending on them too much for our own fulfillment?" Søren Kierkegaard's answer is that we must love other people with God as the "middle term." They explain, "Our love for God demands that we love others (and that we love ourselves) for at least two reasons: all of us are created in the image of God, and God, who loves us, has commanded us to love ourselves and others. So when we love others (and ourselves) with God as the middle term, we love them because we recognize in them the image of the God we love, and because the God whom we love loves them and has commanded us also to love them. ... Neighbor-love – love for others that makes God the "middle term" – is the only sort of love that is immune to idolatry, because it makes our other-love (and self-love) dependent on and subordinate to our love for God."
4. The twin cure is to *quit idolizing human love* and *stop believing we have a right to happiness*. Johnson and Pelsler note, "we can be freed of our tendency to idolize both the people we love and our love itself by learning to love God most of all and to love others as God's image-bearers and, indeed, as God's beloved – in short, by obeying the two great commandments that sum up the Law and the Prophets." Consider how your worship focuses on God and teaches members to love God rightly. To stop believing we have a right to happiness is easier said than done, they admit, because "our beliefs, like our emotions, are rarely (if ever) under our direct voluntary control, and so we must take an indirect approach if we are to free ourselves from them. To resist this mistaken belief in deserved happiness, we might meditate on the Christian doctrines of sin and grace. The first would foster a deep awareness of our sinfulness and unworthiness, and the second would foster a corresponding sense of gratitude for every good thing as an undeserved gift from God. The liturgy of the Church – the prayers of confession, the songs of thanksgiving, and the biblical preaching that evokes appreciation for God's undeserved kindness – can guide us. A deep appreciation of our own unworthiness and consistent grateful recognition of all good things as gracious gifts will work to stifle any sense that we are entitled to happiness."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.