

# When Love Turns to Anger

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**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?**

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**M**ost of us have more than enough anger to go around. Yet, we often reserve our severest wrath for those we love most. No one can infuriate us quite like our spouses, our closest friends, our parents, our children. As a result, uncontrolled anger is perhaps the number one cause of death for relationships. It ruins close friendships, destroys marriages, and severs the familial bond between children and parents, brothers and sisters.

The phenomenon of love turning to anger is particularly prevalent within romantic (or erotic) relationships. In a popular rap song “Love the Way You Lie,” Eminem poignantly describes the paradoxical way in which the most intensely felt romantic love—“You ever love somebody so much you can barely breathe when you’re with ‘em?”—can quickly devolve into a destructive cycle of anger, abuse, and false repentance: “You swore you’d never hit ‘em, never do nothin’ to hurt ‘em. Now you’re in each other’s face spewing venom...you push, pull each other’s hair...throw ‘em down, pin ‘em, so lost in the moments when you’re in ‘em.”<sup>1</sup>

While not all love-turned-to-anger manifests in the kind of physical abuse Eminem depicts, anger naturally gives rise to a desire to punishingly hurt the object of our anger—emotionally and psychologically, if not physically. And this is no less the case when the object of our anger is a family member or friend whom we love than when it is a stranger. Eminem’s

observation echoes the view of Christian thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and C. S. Lewis who claim that many forms of love quite naturally and regularly turn to anger, hatred, jealousy, and other negative attitudes and emotions.<sup>2</sup>

From these troubling observations, two interrelated questions emerge. Why does our love so easily and commonly turn to terrible anger? And, how can we fight this tendency to become wrathful and even abusive toward those closest to us? If we can answer the first question, we will have a head start on answering the second. Understanding the source of a problem is the first step toward solving it.



That we typically direct our wrath toward people who are closest to us may seem unremarkable. After all, anger needs an object and the people we love are often our easiest targets. Because we spend a great deal of time interacting with our family and friends and thus know them best, they are most vulnerable to us and the easiest for us to hurt. 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!

But the mere proximity and vulnerability of close family and friends does not explain the awful extent of the anger we direct toward them, especially when that anger is strong enough to cause the death of those relationships. There must be deeper sources for this pernicious, relationship-destroying anger. We propose that the first source is a particular species of the sin of idolatry. In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis observes that we have a tendency to idolize the “natural loves” of affection, friendship, and erotic love. We are tempted to worship these forms of love as gods, attempting to find our ultimate happiness in them, since they are among the most god-like aspects of human life. Yet, these forms of love are not God and they are not the highest form of divine or spiritual love—which the Christian tradition often calls “charity” and Kierkegaard terms “neighbor-love.” Lewis warns that while the natural loves are valuable as “preparatory imitations” of charity, when we worship them as gods they lose their value and become downright evil:

St. John’s saying that God is love has long been balanced in my mind against the remark of a modern author (M. Denis de Rougemont) that “love ceases to be a demon only when it ceases to be a god;” which of course can be restated in the form “begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god.” This balance seems to me an indispensable safeguard. If we ignore it the truth that God is love may slyly come to mean for us the converse, that love is God.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the claim that “love is God” has become a kind of orthodoxy in popular culture, especially for the faithful in the religion of Oprah. Yet, as

Lewis warns, to treat any of the natural loves as God is idolatrous and dangerous. With respect to erotic (romantic) love in particular, Lewis observes that when we idolize this natural love, we begin to believe that anything done in the name of love is good and noble, no matter how objectively lawless and unloving it might be. For, the feelings of infatuation and “being in love” seem to compel us toward action with “the voice of a god.” But eros is notoriously the most mortal and fleeting of all the loves. Despite our best efforts, the intense feelings of infatuation, romance, and selfless concern for the beloved that constitute eros simply vanish into the emotional fog of the mundane details of life. Lewis remarks, “Can we be in this selfless liberation [of eros] for a lifetime? Hardly for a week. Between the best possible lovers this high condition is intermittent.”<sup>4</sup> When the feelings of erotic love fade, dissatisfaction and frustration ensue. Lewis observes,

These lapses [of feeling] will not destroy a marriage between two ‘decent and sensible’ people. The couple whose marriage will certainly be endangered by them, and possibly ruined, are those who have idolized Eros. They thought that he had the power and truthfulness of a god. They expected that mere feeling would do for them, and permanently, all that was necessary. When this expectation is disappointed they throw the blame on Eros or, more usually, on their partners.<sup>5</sup>

Such disappointed expectations are always the result of some kind of idolatry. When we come to value a created thing above God and expect that thing to satisfy our most fundamental desires and the deepest longings of our soul, the inevitable result is frustration and dissatisfaction. Nothing can satisfy our deepest longings but God. And, as Lewis suggests, when we become disappointed by a natural love’s inability to live up to the divine status we have bestowed on it, we tend to blame the beloved. 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.

This, then, is the beginning of an explanation for why love so often turns to anger. Recognizing the god-likeness of the natural loves, we idolize them

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and ultimately find ourselves disappointed by them. Then instead of recognizing and repenting our idolatry — making strides to love God more than love itself and to love our neighbors as ourselves — we blame those we love for our dissatisfaction and unhappiness. 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.



To understand why such idolatry-induced dissatisfaction can lead to intense anger toward the beloved, we must say more about the emotion of anger itself. Like other emotions, anger is not a mere physiological reaction or “feeling”; rather, it is a way of seeing or construing what makes us mad in terms of certain evaluative concepts. This means that anger represents the world as being a certain way, and therefore it can be accurate or inaccurate. For example, to be afraid is to see (or construe) the object of one’s fear as a threat or danger, which means that fear is accurate when there is really danger and inaccurate when there isn’t any. Anger is similar. As Bob Roberts explains, in anger we see ourselves or someone we care about as having been seriously wronged by an offender (the object of our anger) whom we perceive to be culpable for the offense.<sup>6</sup> Since anger is grounded in a concern for justice, in anger we see the wrong done as an injustice that has been committed and we see it as a bad thing in need of remedy or rectification. Thus, although the desire to punish the offender for the offense is not strictly part of the content of the anger perception, such a desire follows naturally and immediately from the emotion.

Understood in this way, some anger surely is justified. There are real injustices in the world, after all, and it would be vicious, not virtuous, of us to fail to notice those injustices or to understand them as the evils that they are. Yet, for most of us, our primary anger problem is not that we fail to get angry enough about real injustices (though this is also a common problem), but that we get angrier than we should at minor offenses and, worse, we get angry when no injustice has been committed at all. Henry Fairlie suggests this problem of unwarranted anger is due in part to the overblown sense of individual rights that pervades our society. “We have given Wrath its license by elevating a concept of individual and human rights that is flagrantly misleading,” he explains. “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.”<sup>7</sup>

Today, even minor inconveniences may give rise to the angry feeling that our rights have been violated. Believing we have a right to get home

from work in a predictable amount of time, we become angry when traffic slows down as a result of construction, an accident, or just more people than normal trying to drive on the roads at the same time; believing we have a right to expect restaurant and coffee shop workers never to make mistakes with our order, we become angry if they fail to bring what we wanted; believing we have a right to the innumerable conveniences afforded by modern technology, we become angry when our smart phones, tablets, or computers break down or fail to work as expected.<sup>8</sup>

In an extreme but illustrative example, a young California man murdered six people, injured many more, and took his own life, explaining on a YouTube video entitled “Retribution” that this violent rampage was to be a punishment for “an injustice, a crime” – namely, his having “been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to [him].”<sup>9</sup> While few people’s anger eventuates in murder, the phenomenon of anger in response to unfulfilled desires is all too common. Of course, given that anger is essentially an emotional perception of injustice, anger in response to unfulfilled desires is just what we should expect in a society in which 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.

Here, then, is a second sin – irresponsibly believing that we have a right to be happy – that combines

with idolatry of love to give rise to relationship-destroying anger. Intimate personal relationships are one of the most important constituents of human flourishing. It is therefore unsurprising that, having been convinced that everyone has a right to be happy, so many people come to believe (implicitly or subconsciously, if not explicitly and consciously) that they have a right to be happy in their relationships. Then, when they find themselves unhappy in their relationships, they naturally see the impediment to their happiness as a serious offense, an injustice, a violation of their rights. Herein lies their anger.

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The disease of love turning to anger, we conclude, has a two-fold source that can be summarized in the popular slogans: “Love is God” and “I have a right to be happy.” When we come to expect that love and our

loving relationships will do for us what only God can do – save us from our sinful selves and satisfy the deepest longings of our souls – we inevitably end up disappointed and unhappy. And when we buy into the lie that we deserve – that is, *we have a right* – to be happy, we construe our unhappiness and disappointment 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, together with our love for them, we expected to make us happy.



Is there a cure for this spiritual disease of love turning to anger? We need to treat both of its underlying causes: we need to stop idolizing love and stop believing that we have a right to be happy. We will discuss these in reverse order.

First, we need to stop believing, deep down, that we have a right to be happy. This is easier said than done; 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.

Second, we need to stop idolizing love and the people whom we love; we must look to God for our ultimate fulfillment. But this raises a puzzle: 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? This is an old puzzle that Augustine wrestled with, but without coming to an entirely satisfactory conclusion. Søren Kierkegaard has an answer: we must love them, he says, with God as the “middle term.”<sup>10</sup> What this means is that we must love other people *because of* our love for God, so that our love for other people becomes an extension of our love for God. 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. Kierkegaard thinks that this is the sort of love that we are commanded to bear toward our neighbor in the second

great commandment—“love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39)—and so he calls this sort of love “neighbor-love.” Of course, any neighbor-love we might bear toward another can be only as strong as our love toward God (since neighbor-love depends by its very nature on our love for God). So, our ability to fulfill the second great commandment depends on our ability to fulfill the first great commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). We must love God if we are to love others because of our love for God.

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. To protect against idolatry, we must surround our love for other people in a cocoon of neighbor-love. We must love them *first and primarily* as our neighbor, recognizing and loving the image of God in them, and *only then* love them as spouse, or child, or friend. Then we are prevented from idolizing them and they are protected from the consequences of our idolatry, including the sort of inordinate anger we have been discussing.

The twofold cause of the anger that we direct at our closest loved ones therefore has a twofold cure. 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.

More fundamentally, 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. This second task amounts to loving others with God as the “middle

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term,” which makes our love for them an extension of and dependent on our love for God. Both tasks are gargantuan. They are beyond our unassisted capabilities, which is why we must proceed by depending on the Holy Spirit, whose power alone enables us to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1b-2).<sup>11</sup>

**NOTES**

1 Eminem, "Love the Way You Lie," from *Recovery* (Shady Records/Aftermath Records/Interscope Records, 2010).

2 See C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960) and Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, translated by Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 49-52.

3 Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 6-7.

4 *Ibid.*, 114.

5 *Ibid.*

6 See Robert C. Roberts, "Anger in the Christian Life," *Anger, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 53 (Waco, TX: The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University, 2014), 11-20.

7 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 91.

8 Comedian Louis CK, in an interview with Conan O'Brien, cleverly and comically critiques how we believe we have a right to brand new technologies and then get angry when those technologies fail. See "Everything's Amazing, Nobody's Happy" *www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEY58fiSK8E* (accessed June 6, 2014).

9 Transcript of Elliot Rogers's "Retribution" video, *www.cnn.com/2014/05/24/us/elliott-rodger-video-transcript/index.html* (accessed June 5, 2014).

10 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 70.

11 The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U. S. Air Force, the U. S. Department of Defense, or the U. S. government.

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