

Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?

BY STEPHEN VOORWINDE

Although often sourced in his foreknowledge, the way Jesus handles his anger provides a model for Christians today. He knows how to be indignant, irate, and even furious, but without the slightest trace of derision, contempt, or abuse.

One of Jesus' genuinely "hard sayings" is found in the Sermon on the Mount, "I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22a).¹ From as early as the second century Christian scribes sought to soften this statement by adding the phrase "without cause," a reading that has been retained by both the King James and the New King James translations. Popular as this addition has become, it is unlikely to have been original.² Jesus does not qualify anger in this way. He is not referring to anger "without cause," but to anger pure and simple. His claim is stark and absolute. Anger will lead to judgment.

Such an unqualified reading of Jesus' statement is not without its problems. On several occasions in the Gospels Jesus would appear to become quite angry himself. So how does his behavior square with his strong denunciation of anger in the Sermon on the Mount? All the expressions of Jesus' anger in the Gospels are worth examining in light of this question.

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

In discussions of Jesus' anger, the example that is most often cited is his cleansing of the Jerusalem temple. All four Gospels record this event. On closer inspection, however, none of the accounts make any explicit reference

to Jesus' anger. The Synoptic Gospels record what appear to be violent actions on the part of Jesus. They report that he drove out of the temple area "all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15). Luke's version of events is more muted. He simply records that Jesus "entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling" (Luke 19:45). Nevertheless, in each case readers are left with the distinct impression that Jesus is expressing outrage at what he sees happening around him. In point of fact, however, none of the Synoptic accounts attributes any emotion whatsoever to Jesus in connection with this incident. A clue to this silence is suggested by Mark's account which alone indicates a day's interval between Jesus looking around at everything in the temple (Mark 11:11) and his cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15-17). This interval leads Richard France to conclude, "The day's delay mentioned by Mark suggests...that it was less a spontaneous outburst of anger than a planned act of defiance and public demonstration of the Messiah's authority."³ So perhaps Matthew, Mark, and Luke deliberately underplay Jesus' anger in what is often regarded as his clearest expression of the emotion in the New Testament. Far from being an expression of uncontrolled rage, Jesus' actions in the temple are well thought through and carefully premeditated.

In John there is no reticence to attribute an emotion to Jesus in connection with the temple cleansing, but the emotion specifically mentioned is not anger, but zeal. "His disciples remembered that it is written: 'Zeal for your house will consume me'" (John 2:17). John's description of events is more vivid than the Synoptic Gospels'; he adds more details. He alone mentions the whip and the fact that all the sheep and cattle are driven from the temple area, as well as the challenge to those selling doves, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:15-16). These words and actions are very aptly described by the word *zeal*. Zeal is more than anger. It is the ardor of red-hot passion. What Jesus sees happening in the temple precincts at Passover is enough to make his blood boil. The best way to describe his emotional state is the disciples' later recollection of Psalm 69:9, where the Psalmist expresses a passion for the house of God — so much so that it is all-consuming. It eats him up. The same is true of Jesus when he cleanses the temple. But there is more; the Psalmist says, "Zeal for your house *consumes* me" (present tense) or "*has consumed* me" (past tense). Both are legitimate translations of the Hebrew perfect tense used in Psalm 69:9. But John 2:17 adopts neither of these alternatives. It deliberately opts for the future tense: "Zeal for your house *will consume* me."⁴ Why this change? The reason lies in the nature of Jesus' zeal. For him it is more than an all-consuming passion. Something is yet to happen. The Messiah must die. Zeal for God's house will not just eat him up psychologically, as was the case with the Psalmist. Jesus has more than a passionate ardor for the house of God. He has a zeal that will consume him utterly and totally. This quotation from the Psalter is a prediction of his death.

Strictly speaking then, neither John nor the Synoptics see Jesus' temple cleansing as an expression of anger. The most that can be said for the Synoptics is that they describe an incident of well managed outrage. John, on the other hand, refers to it as an all-consuming zeal. This contrast should not be lost on us. In the Synoptic narrative the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities reaches a new intensity at this point. He takes control of the temple, the very center of Jewish religious life and ritual. It is by God's authority that he does these things. In John's Gospel he acts in his capacity as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36). It is dangerous for a lamb to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. This Lamb must die – but not yet, for his hour had not yet come (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20).

A SABBATH HEALING

The healing of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue at Capernaum is recorded by all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11), but only Mark reports Jesus' emotional reaction. "He looked around at them in anger...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5). These emotions are more understandable in their context. They come toward the end of Mark's first controversy section (Mark 2:1-3:6). The religious leaders' antagonism toward Jesus has been mounting steadily. Finally it culminates in the Pharisees' plot with the Herodians to kill him (Mark 3:6). For the first time in Mark's narrative the conflict has become deadly.

The immediate context throws further light on Jesus' intense feelings at this point. They set the scene for the healing and come in response to the Pharisees' stubborn refusal to answer Jesus' simple but well-targeted question, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). The implications are clear: by healing the man Jesus is saving life and doing good, and by plotting to kill him the Pharisees are doing evil. With superhuman insight Jesus reads their minds and knows their hearts.

Mark's account provides a penetrating insight into Jesus' psyche. His anger and distress complement one another. It would be tempting to conclude that his anger is tempered by his grief. But this is not entirely correct. More accurately, anger is the outward emotion and distress the inward. His anger is felt by all who sit under his wrathful gaze during that tense and hushed moment in the synagogue. His distress lies deeper, in the inner recesses of his soul. With perceptive insight into human nature, Benjamin Warfield has observed that "the fundamental psychology of anger is curiously illustrated by this account; for anger always has pain as its root, and is a reaction of the soul against what gives it discomfort."⁵ The hardness of the Pharisees' hearts deeply hurts Jesus and his anger rises in response to the cause of his pain.

INDIGNATION AT THE DISCIPLES

As was the case with the healing of the man with the shriveled hand, the pericope of the blessing of the children is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Once again Mark is unique

in recording an emotion of Jesus. When he sees the disciples rebuking people who are bringing little children to have him touch them, Jesus is indignant (Mark 10:14). Including this detail in his Gospel is clearly a bold move on Mark's part. It appears that he is attributing a rather unpleasant emotion to Jesus. The other contexts in which he mentions indignation are never positive. The ten other disciples are indignant with James and John for asking Jesus for special places of honor in his coming kingdom (Mark 10:41; cf. Matthew 20:24). At the home of Simon the Leper the disciples are mistakenly indignant at the woman who anoints Jesus because they think it is such a waste of money (Mark 14:4; cf. Matthew 26:8). By noting Jesus' indignation, Mark seems to link him to his disciples at times when they are obviously not at their best.

The remaining New Testament references further underscore the unpleasantness of this emotion. Matthew notes the indignation of the scribes and Pharisees when the children in the temple are shouting, "Hosanna to the son of David" (Matthew 21:15). Luke observes that a synagogue ruler is indignant because Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). Jesus' indignation therefore does not place him in the best of company.

Why is Jesus so aroused and angry when the disciples prevent children from being brought to him? Why this strong, negative emotion? There appears to be two reasons. First, by their actions the disciples are failing dismally to put into practice Jesus' earlier teaching that to receive a child in his name is to receive him (Mark 9:37). The second reason comes from the immediate context: "Let the little children

come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:14-15). The disciples are hindering from coming to Jesus the very kind of people to whom the kingdom of God belongs. These children are such suitable candidates for the kingdom not because of

attractive, childlike qualities they have to offer, but—in sharp contrast to the rich young ruler in the preceding periscope—because they have nothing to offer at all. Entry into the kingdom is by grace, and by grace alone.

Therefore what really incenses Jesus is not just the fact that the disciples have such a tenuous understanding of God's grace but that they manage to stand in its way. By hindering the children's access to Jesus they are also

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obstructing God's grace. As a result, they earn Jesus' ire. It cannot be a pleasant experience for the disciples to be on the receiving end of his indignation, but they need to learn an important lesson.

THE CASE OF AN UNUSUAL GREEK VERB

The verb *embrimaomai* is used only rarely in Scripture. Its sole occurrence in the Septuagint is in Daniel 11:30 where the Romans rebuke Antiochus Epiphanes. In the New Testament it is used five times. In four of these occurrences Jesus is the subject of the verb. Twice he sternly warns people he has just healed not to tell anyone about the miracle (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43). At the tomb of Lazarus it says twice that Jesus is deeply moved (John 11:33, 38). These translations of the verb in the Gospels certainly have emotional overtones, but how can we know that anger is the underlying emotion in each case?

The only other occurrence of *embrimaomai* is instructive. In Mark 14:5 those at the home of Simon the Leper harshly rebuke the woman who has anointed Jesus for wasting the expensive perfume rather than selling it and giving the money to the poor. In this instance anger is explicitly mentioned. In the previous verse we are told that some people who are present at the dinner are angry or indignant at what was happening. This anger then spills over into their speech rebuking the woman. The Gospel reports "They scolded her" (ESV, NRSV), "They criticized her harshly" (TEV), "They snarled" (LB), "They turned upon her with fury" (NEB), "They were angry with her" (JB). It would seem a bold move to attribute such a strongly negative emotion to Jesus in the other contexts, and most English translations appear reluctant to do so. Yet if *embrimaomai* is understood consistently across all five Gospel occurrences, some fascinating perspectives on Jesus' anger are opened up.

Why would he be angry with two men whose sight he has just restored (Matthew 9:30) or with a beggar whom he has cleansed from leprosy (Mark 1:43)? In both cases the reason for the anger is essentially the same. He is angry with them not for what they have done but for what they will do. They are about to show flagrant disregard for his clear command to keep these miracles quiet. Instead, they are going to spread the news like wildfire. This will make his mission dangerous and his ministry more difficult. In Matthew the stage is set for a conflict that will escalate into the "Beelzebul controversy" (Matthew 12:22-37). In Mark the man's loose tongue has major implications for Jesus' early ministry in Galilee: "Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places" (Mark 1:45). On his eventual return to Capernaum he will be dogged by increasingly hostile opposition (Mark 2:1-3:6). In his stern rebukes to the formerly blind and leprous men, Jesus foresees the looming storm. His anger is driven by his foreknowledge. The way his supplicants had approached him had hinted at his divinity (Matthew 9:27-28; Mark 1:40). He now responds in character.⁶

The same dynamics would appear to operate as Jesus approaches the tomb of Lazarus. Seeing that Mary and the Jews who had come along with

her are weeping, “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33). After shedding tears himself, he goes to the tomb and is “once more deeply moved” (John 11:38). Jesus’ emotions become decidedly complex at this point. Outwardly he expresses grief. Hence the reaction of the Jews, “See how he loved him” (John 11:36). But inwardly he is driven by indignation. His anger is triggered by the weeping of Mary and her companions. Yet he is not angry at their weeping, but rather because of their weeping. As Warfield explains:

It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy. Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but this is incidental. His soul is held by rage.... Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites on our behalf.⁷

In Lazarus’ death Jesus foresees his own. It is probably this that disturbs him most of all. Amidst the tears he is profoundly enraged. This is no ordinary human emotion. Once again it is driven by his foreknowledge of what lies ahead. In John’s Gospel the raising of Lazarus becomes the proximate cause of Jesus’ death (John 11:45-53). Lazarus is a friend for whom Jesus is prepared to lay down his life (John 11:11; 15:13).

CONCLUSION

Jesus’ anger in the Gospels is therefore a nuanced emotion expressed in a variety of ways. His zeal or passionate ardor is unleashed on those who dare to turn his Father’s

house into a market (John 2:17). He is angry with the Pharisees who are about to plot his death, pained at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5). He is indignant with his disciples standing in the way of children (Mark 10:14). He harshly rebukes those who are about to flagrantly disobey his clear command not to spread the news of a miracle (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43).

At the tomb of Lazarus, he is enraged at death and the devil (John 11:33, 38). Apart from his indignation with the disciples, there is an element of supernatural insight or divine foresight in every case. We catch glimpses of the wrath of God. There are also forebodings of his death.

For all the hints of divinity that might be detected in Jesus’ various expressions of anger, the question still needs to be asked whether his

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behavior lives up to the high standards he sets for others in the Sermon on the Mount. Does he in fact practice what he preaches?

Jesus' statement that "everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22) must of course be read in context. In the same verse Jesus speaks of that brother being called "Raca" and "a fool," both strong terms of abuse that carry overtones of insult, derision, and contempt. Clearly Jesus never expresses his anger in that way. His is never the kind of anger that, according to his teaching, would have been in violation of the sixth commandment not to murder. Although expressed strongly, and on occasion even violently, his wrath always falls within the category of sinless anger or righteous indignation. Jesus' behavior clearly exemplifies the later instruction by the apostle Paul: "Be angry [an imperative!], but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26). Jesus' anger is always well controlled, precisely targeted, and short-lived.

But not only is Jesus' anger expressed differently than sinful human anger, it also is generated differently. His anger is not an instant response to provocation, but a function of his impeccable holiness. Although often sourced in his foreknowledge, and at times best understood in the light of his coming Passion, the way Jesus handles his anger still provides a model for Christians today. He knows how to be indignant, irate, and even furious, but without the slightest trace of derision, contempt, or abuse. The high standards that he sets for others are the standards he lives up to himself.

NOTES

1 The New Testament translations in this article are my own.

2 Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, second edition (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, 1994), 11.

3 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 783.

4 For a detailed discussion of the textual and grammatical issues underlying this change of tense, see Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 132-136.

5 Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord," in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), 108.

6 For further detailed discussion of these incidents, see Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Gospels* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 21-24, and 68-74.

7 Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord," 117.



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