



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Institute for Faith and Learning
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Study Guides for

Anger

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the problematic role of anger in Christian life. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Anger in the Christian Life** 2
Anger expresses a sense of justice and of being in the presence of responsible agents. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle Paul notes, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.
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Focus Article:

- 📖 Anger in the Christian Life
(*Anger*, pp. 11-20)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Artful Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 81-88)
- 📖 Bringing Anger into the Light
(*Anger*, pp. 89-93)

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Anger in the Christian Life

Anger expresses a sense of justice and of being in the presence of responsible agents. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective. But, as the Apostle Paul notes, the problem with most of us is not that we are too slow to anger but that our anger tends to be sin and to spawn sin.

Prayer

First we pray for those we know who endure abuses, who are mistreated, and who need an advocate stirred by righteous anger. (*Members offer silent petitions.*)

For these we pray: **Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

We pray for those we know who inflict injury on others by neglect, who abuse their power, and who need correction, repentance, and forgiveness. (*Members offer silent petitions.*)

For these we pray: **Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

We pray for our own need for discernment about when to be angry, for a patient and forgiving spirit, for openness to correction, and for forgiveness for injustices done and injuries permitted. (*Members offer silent confessions.*)

For ourselves we pray: **Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.**

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:21-5:2

Reflection

Among the things that the Apostle Paul lists as contrary to the new life of the Christian are “bitterness and wrath and anger,” along with the unsavory company they keep: “wrangling and slander, together with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31; cf. Colossians 3:8). These belong to the old self and need to be “stripped off.” “In their place we are to clothe ourselves with such things as love and peace,” Bob Roberts writes. “Since the Apostle allows that proper anger in small quantities can be good, perhaps he is speaking here not of all *instances* of anger but rather of the *vice* of irascibility – of being an angry sort of person.”

Roberts identifies four defining features of the emotion of anger: we cast blame on someone (the offender), want that person to be hurt, see the person as unattractive, and see ourselves as in a position to judge. Therefore, he explains, “If anger is ever to be right and fitting, two things must be true: first, that people are sometimes blameworthy, and their blameworthiness makes them unattractive and makes them deserve to be hurt; second, that somebody is in a position to judge. If this sounds harsh, remember that there are degrees of blameworthiness and degrees of anger: someone can be just a little bit unattractive, and for just a moment and in a particular context, and one can deserve to be hurt just a little bit. If anger is to be right and fitting, it needs not only to be in response to someone who is actually blameworthy and unattractive and who deserves to be hurt, but also to be limited to a degree of intensity that matches the case.”

Instances of righteous anger – that is, when we feel angry at the right time, for the right reason, and to the right degree – are signs of emotional health. They reveal that we care properly about what is valuable in ourselves, other people, the creation, and God. And such feelings signal offenders that they have harmed or failed to respect a person or thing of significant value.



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Yet episodes of anger can go badly wrong. They will be inappropriate if we are quite mistaken about the other, the suspected offense, or our position to judge. And even when our angry feelings are appropriate, we may wrongly nurse them and wrongly express them. Ideally, they should lead us to correct, forgive, and love the other. But when we hold onto angry feelings – that is, we “let the sun go down on our anger” – our vision becomes increasingly skewed: we are more inclined to focus on others’ blameworthiness, unattractiveness, and deserving to be hurt, and this makes it more difficult to notice their goodness and any mitigating circumstances to their actions.

Unchecked anger is dangerous in another way: since it has “a judgmental aspect,” Roberts notes, “if anger is practiced wholeheartedly and habitually, it can lead to a very distorted sense of one’s status vis-à-vis other sinners and vis-à-vis God.”

Roberts concludes, “Few things are uglier than a thoroughly irascible person, and it is clear why very early in the history of the Church anger came to be regarded as one of the seven deadly vices. When it gets deep and pervasive in a life it really does kill love and everything lovely.”

Study Questions

1. What are the four defining features of anger, according to Bob Roberts? Give some examples of *righteous* anger (i.e., when all of the features are realized in a proper way). Describe some specific cases of inappropriate anger in which one or more of the features is distorted in some way.
2. Why do some people fail to get angry about things that should make them mad?
3. Consider how Roberts describes the *vice* of anger. What are the differences between (what he calls) “a thoroughly irascible person” and someone who becomes properly angry?
4. Discuss how the three artists in Nathan Corbitt’s *Artful Anger* are helping their communities to express righteous anger.

Departing Hymn: “God of Grace and God of Glory” (vv. 1 and 5)

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
crown your ancient Church’s story;
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1930), alt.
Tune: CWM RHONDDA



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Focus Article:

📖 Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 21-29)

Suggested Article:

📖 Consuming Fury
(*Anger*, pp. 58-59)

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Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger

A wide gap looms between knowing *that* we should eliminate inappropriate anger from our lives and knowing *how* to do so. The Christian tradition offers practical guidance, including the anger antidotes of watchfulness, practicing virtue, and prayer.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6

Meditation†

The fourth-century Christians who retreated to live in faithful communities in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine became familiar with the daily annoyances of living shoulder-to-shoulder with others. They told this story about their lurking propensity to anger:

A brother was restless in his community and he was often irritated. So he said, "I will go and live somewhere by myself. I will not be able to talk or listen to anyone and so I shall be at peace, and my passionate anger will cease." He went out and lived alone in a cave. But one day he filled his jug with water and put it on the ground. Suddenly it happened to fall over. He filled it again, and again it fell. This happened a third time. In a rage he snatched up the jug and smashed it. Coming to his senses, he knew that the demon of anger had mocked him, and he said, "Here I am by myself, and he has beaten me. I will return to the community. Wherever you live, you need effort and patience and above all God's help." So he got up and went back.

Reflection

"Anger is a way of 'seeing' that presents the world to us in terms of blameworthy offense, presents us to ourselves as being in a moral position to judge, and breeds in us a desire for 'pay back,'" Ryan West writes. "Thus, getting rid of inappropriate anger—anger that is either misdirected, too quick to flare up, blazing too hot, or too slow to burn out—will involve (among other things) reshaping one's heart in such a way that one is not so apt to see the world in anger's terms."

West commends three of the anger antidotes proposed by the desert Christians in the fourth century. He notes how these potential remedies help redirect and retrain (what the Apostle Paul calls) "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18)—which is the ability to appreciate God's work in our lives and relationships.

- ▶ *Watchfulness* involves "self-reconnaissance and a tactical implementation of the 'intel' that one gathers." In an anger journal we can briefly note the source and intensity of episodes of anger. Is the cause "our over-attachment to worldly goods, unrealistic expectations of the people in our lives, an inflated sense of our own importance, and a misinformed or misdirected passion for justice"? Later, when cooled down, we can return to the journal to ask: Was the anger justified? Was it too quick, intense, or long-lasting? Was it expressed well? "Done prayerfully, in conversation with trusted loved ones, and leaning heavily on God's Spirit," such journaling equips us "to be more effectively 'on the watch' in the future." Implementing what we learn can even become automatic, like defensive driving: "the watchful person working on her anger will appreciate her potential hazards and will monitor for cues that anger may be just around the corner."



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► *Practicing virtues* – like compassion, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and gratitude – is not only *good in itself*, but also *good for retraining* our emotional perceptions of our situations. The virtues dispose us to notice the good in others and respond in anger-defeating ways. For instance, a “gentle (or meek) person is not anger-free; significant injustice draws her ire. But she is not angered by the trivial slights that provoke many of us to wrath, and the anger she does experience is appropriately tempered in duration and intensity. As such, the gentle are characteristically tender and calm, avoiding harshness and severity in favor of mildness.”

► *Prayer*, most importantly, turns us toward God for strength, encouragement, and assistance in resisting inappropriate anger. Also, in subtle ways prayer adjusts our perceptions of anger-raising situations. *On-the-spot prayers* can be habitual and second nature. When sensing a cue to anger, we might pray “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on *us sinners*,” including ourselves and the (actual or merely perceived) offenders in our prayer. This redirects our attention to our own liability for wrongdoing, and it begins a process of reconciliation, or forestalls a break in relationship, with the offender “by attending to our shared membership in the community of those for whom Christ died and who stand in need of God’s forgiveness.” Likewise, *off-the-spot prayers* for patience and gentleness in regular public worship and private devotion “provide us with an alternative set of interpretive categories and prime us to apply them.”

Because “dealing with anger is rather person-specific,” applying these practices requires practical wisdom and patience. West concludes, “Coming to terms with our anger is difficult; figuring out how to fight against it takes time, and successfully retraining our habits of construal and desire requires much more time. We should not expect to turn into paragons of love or gentleness or any of the other virtues overnight.... We should strive to appreciate God’s patience toward us and to emulate his attitude.”

Study Questions

1. How does an anger journal give us the personal sort of knowledge we need to resist inappropriate anger?
2. Consider how *on-the-spot* and *off-the-spot* prayers adjust how we see ourselves and offenders in anger-causing situations. What does this suggest about the value of habitual, automatic prayers and planned (personal or corporate) prayers?
3. How do the three anger antidotes change our *habits* of attention and perception? Why is this important?
4. In the story of the desert Christian in the meditation, what do you notice about the propensity toward anger?
5. Consider Giorgio Vasari’s depiction of fury in *The Damned Soul*. What does it suggest about the nature of anger?

Departing Hymn: “Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus”

† *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, 7.33, translated by Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 71.



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Focus Article:

📖 Getting Rid of
Inappropriate Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 30-36)

Suggested Article:

📖 Zeal for God's House
(*Anger*, pp. 60-62)

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Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?

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.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:21-26 and John 2:13-17

Prayer

Christ, you command us to avoid unrighteous anger and insults toward those who offend us, and to love our enemies. By the model of your life and death, and through the power of your resurrection, enable us to do what you command. Amen.

Reflection

If Jesus gets angry (as he seems to do in the Gospels), what is the source of his anger and how does he express it? Can we square Jesus' feelings and actions with his strong denunciation of anger (Matthew 5:21-26)? With these questions in mind, Stephen Voorwinde examines the Gospel stories about Jesus' anger.

- ▶ *The cleansing the Jerusalem temple* often comes to mind when we think of Jesus getting angry. All four Gospels record the event (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:11, 15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-25), but the brief Synoptic accounts do not attribute any emotion to Jesus. According to Mark, a full day passes between Jesus looking around the temple (11:11) and his cleansing the temple (11:15-17). Does this explain why Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention Jesus' emotion? "Far from being an expression of uncontrolled rage, Jesus' actions in the temple are well thought through and carefully premeditated," Voorwinde notes. In John's detailed account, the disciples attribute Jesus' actions to zeal for his Father's house (John 2:17). A reference to Psalm 69:9 is adjusted slightly – from "Zeal for your house *consumes* me" or "*has consumed* me" in the psalm, to "Zeal for your house *will consume* me" (future tense). Why this change? Voorwinde suggests Jesus "has a zeal that will consume him utterly and totally. This quotation from the Psalter is a prediction of his death."
- ▶ *The sabbath healing of the man with the withered hand* is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11), but only Mark reports Jesus' emotions (Mark 3:5). This event is the culmination of a series of controversies (2:1-3:6) that leave some Pharisees and Herodians plotting to kill Jesus. Voorwinde thinks Jesus' two emotions here, anger and distress, are related. "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.' The hardness of the Pharisees' hearts deeply hurts Jesus and his anger rises in response to the cause of his pain."
- ▶ *Jesus is indignant at the disciples* who prevent children from being brought to him for a blessing (Mark 10:14). Once again, the other Synoptic Gospels do not mention Jesus' emotion (Matthew 19:13-15;



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Luke 18:15-17). Why is Jesus so angry? The disciples disobey Jesus' instruction to welcome children (Mark 9:37), and they prevent from coming to him the very kind of people to whom the kingdom of God belongs (Mark 10:14-15). It is not some "attractive, childlike qualities" that make the children so suitable for the kingdom, Voorwinde believes, but that they come to Jesus with nothing to offer at all. "Entry into the kingdom is by grace, and by grace alone," he notes. "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." Jesus' anger communicates an important lesson to the disciples.

- ▶ A rare term for harsh rebuke (*embrimaomai*) is used of Jesus four times. He "sternly warns" people he has healed not to tell others about the miracles (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43). "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...[and] make his mission dangerous and his ministry more difficult" (cf. Matthew 12:22-37 and Mark 1:45). "In his stern rebukes to the formerly blind and leprous men, Jesus foresees the looming storm. His anger is driven by his foreknowledge." Voorwinde finds a similar pattern in Jesus' anger at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:33, 38, where *embrimaomai* is translated "was deeply moved"). Jesus is not angry at Mary and her companions' weeping, but *because* of their weeping. "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," Benjamin Warfield wrote of this passage. "Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites on our behalf." Voorwinde suggests, "In Lazarus's death Jesus foresees his own. This is no ordinary human emotion. Once again it is driven by his foreknowledge of what lies ahead." "Apart from his indignation with the disciples, there is an element of supernatural insight or divine foresight in every case" of Jesus' anger, Voorwinde concludes. "We catch glimpses of the wrath of God. There are also forebodings of his death."

Study Questions

1. In each of the Gospel stories discussed above, does Jesus practice what he preaches in his strong condemnation of sinful anger in the Sermon on the Mount?
2. Discuss Voorwinde's view that "not only is Jesus' anger *expressed* differently than sinful human anger, it also is *generated* differently." How, then, is Jesus a model for our anger?
3. Consider how Scarcella depicts the intensity of Jesus' emotion in *Christ Driving the Money Lenders from the Temple*. How were images of this event used to teach members during the Catholic Reformation? What can we learn from them today?

Departing Hymn: "Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus"



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Focus Article:

📖 Divine Wrath
and Human Anger
(*Anger*, pp. 37-45)

Suggested Article:

📖 Righteous Indignation
(*Anger*, pp. 56-57)

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Divine Wrath and Human Anger

Embarrassment over references to God's ire is not a recent phenomenon or the product of modern religious sensibilities. Early Christian theologians were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger, and feared it would be the context in which believers came to understand divine wrath.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Exodus 32:1-20 and 34:1-9

Reflection

"Scripture is replete with references to divine indignation," Michael McCarthy notes. "How we should appropriate images of God's wrath is far from obvious." Some Christians relish them: they claim that certain wars, terrorist acts, AIDS, and natural disasters are signs of God's wrath today, and they may even use the images to justify their own violent actions. For other Christians, the references to divine wrath are an embarrassment; in many churches they are omitted from Lectionary readings.

For insight in interpreting these difficult passages, McCarthy turns to four North African theologians in late antiquity who "were deeply sensitive to the destructive consequences of human anger. They worked within a social and intellectual environment that placed great emphasis on the virtue of humans to control their rage. Furthermore, they saw that the terrible experience of human anger often supplied the context in which many readers of the Bible would come to understand divine wrath."

- ▶ *Arnobius of Sicca* (d. 330) *denies God's wrath on philosophical grounds*: it would compromise God's sense of justice. "To be angry, Arnobius says, is to be insane, to rage, to be carried away into the lust for vengeance, and to be in a frenzy by alienation of the heart. Such gods would be worse than beasts, monsters, and deadly snakes that can contain their poison." He does not wrestle with scriptural texts that imply divine anger. But his position shows the great difficulty they posed for theologians in late antiquity.
- ▶ *Tertullian* (d. 225) and *Lactantius* (d. 320), *like most early Christian thinkers, defend God's wrath by insisting it is radically different from our anger*. "The anger endemic to so many processes of human society," McCarthy explains, "operates in profound ignorance and employs mechanisms of brutality even in the name of justice. God's anger, they say, is not like that."

Tertullian believes God's wrath is required for divine justice and reveals God's will to save. We are often overcome by anger, but only "[God] can be angry without being shaken, can be annoyed without coming into peril, can be moved without being overthrown."

Lactantius makes a similar point: due to his kindness, God expresses "affections of virtue" like anger toward the wicked, love toward the good, and compassion for the suffering. Fear of God's wrath serves the common good by reminding humans of the demands of justice. He writes, "[C]onscience greatly checks people, if we believe we are living in the sight of God; if we realize that not only what we do is seen from above but also what we think or say is heard by God."

- ▶ *Augustine* (d. 430) *agrees divine wrath is part of God's justice*. References to God's wrath might signify "the divine power to punish, the



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correction a person endures painfully when he or she recognizes estrangement from God, an inveterate sinner's darkness of mind toward God, or even God's raising up anger within a person who recognizes that someone else is violating the divine law," McCarthy notes. We must be careful in ascribing anger to God: it's not really an emotion, but a judgment on sin that causes a range of emotions—guilt, shame, fear, zeal—in us. "If we can speak about God having emotions, it is only by analogy *or* in relation to the human emotions experienced by Christ, who represents to Augustine the model affective life." This view lets Augustine "deny that God ever suffers anything like human anger while maintaining, on the other hand, the narrative integrity of the Bible and a theological claim of God's ultimate justice."

"The ancient concern was overwhelmingly to show that God decidedly does not act the destructive way that angry humans frequently do, wreaking harm on their social inferiors. Many of the patristic writers attempted, rather, to create a space where references to God's wrath may be regarded as part of God's providence, leading people to greater life, justice, and well-being," McCarthy concludes. "Human rage cannot be the frame wherein we come to understand what God's anger means."

Study Questions

1. Consider why Michael McCarthy chooses the early theologians of North Africa for his study of divine wrath and human anger. What two general strategies did those theologians employ to avoid the projection of human fury onto God?
2. Why, according to Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine, does the Bible speak of God's wrath? What different messages do the wicked and the righteous hear?
3. Discuss McCarthy's claim that we live "in a world where misguided rage can easily masquerade as righteous indignation, [and thus] it is no small thing to exercise great caution when we are tempted to project our wrath onto God."
4. What elements of the story in Exodus 32:1-20 and 34:1-9 are depicted in Domenico Beccafumi's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law*? Discuss the relation between divine wrath and human anger in this story.

Departing Hymn: "O Come, My Soul, Sing Praise to God Our Maker" (vv. 1 and 2)

O come, my soul, sing praise to God your Maker,
and all within me, praise his holy name.
Sing praise to God, forget not all his mercies,
his pardoning grace and saving love proclaim.
*Praise him, you angels, wondrous in might,
praise him you servants who in his will delight.*

Good is the Lord and full of kind compassion,
most slow to anger, plenteous in love.
Rich is his grace to all who humbly seek him,
boundless and endless as the heavens above.
Refrain.

Psalter (1912), alt.

Tune: TIDINGS



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Focus Articles:

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

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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



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Getting Angry at God
(*Anger*, pp. 65-72)

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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Getting Angry at God

Regardless of whether it is safe or adaptive or morally correct, many of us sometimes feel angry at God. Can we be angry at God and still love God? Does being angry necessarily imply a major rift in the relationship?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 42

Reflection

Julie Exline studies the anger that people direct toward God. She does not ask the philosophical question: Is it morally justified? Since “God is incapable of committing mistakes, much less injustices,” she admits, “it could be difficult to see anger toward God as having any sort of legitimate moral backing.” And she does not ask the prudential question: Is it safe to get on God’s bad side? Rather, as a psychologist, she wonders: Why do people become angry at God? How do they deal with their anger? And how can others help them?

Between one-third and two-thirds of adults in Exline’s studies report they have been angry at God – about significant events like “major life crises, deaths, and natural disasters,” or over small irritations like “a stomach virus, a traffic jam, or rain on the day of a picnic.” She discovered:

- ▶ *People become nervous talking about their anger at God.* Believers, especially, worry whether they can be angry at God and also love God. Exline offers a word of comfort: “As in close human relationships, feelings such as love, respect, and closeness toward God often coexist with feelings of anger.”

People who are angry at God also worry that others will shame or reject them. “Most people reported...supportive responses: the people that they told were able to relate to their feelings, or they said something encouraging. But...about half of those who disclosed anger received a response that felt less supportive.”

- ▶ *People handle their anger at God better when they are supported by others.* “To the extent that people reported supportive responses to their disclosures of anger at God, they were more likely to report that they had approached God and that their faith had grown stronger as a result of the incident.” Those who received unsupportive responses, however, were more likely to stay angry at God, try to suppress their angry feelings, rebel against God, or use alcohol or drugs to cope.

When people try to suppress their feelings by doing the right things – pray, read Scripture, serve God – but “are afraid to acknowledge negative feelings, a wall can go up,” Exline notes. “Intimacy is blocked.”

- ▶ *A close relationship with God allows people to express their anger.* “People who reported the closest, most resilient relationships with God *definitely* saw it as wrong to do anything that implied rejection of God or rebellion against God’s authority,” Exline writes. But once the decision to rebel and walk away from God was off the table, “these same people...saw it as morally appropriate to do some complaining and to ask God tough questions.” She notes, “If we are



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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able to commit ourselves to the relationship and to feel reasonably secure there, finding the freedom to express our thoughts and feelings in an open way can truly free us. And it can provide hope for a closer, deeper, and more intimate relationship with God."

- ▶ *Examining one's anger at God is the best response.* If the anger is clearly unjustified – e.g., because it is "rooted in envy of others, a selfish desire to always get our own way, or expectation of special treatment by God" – then "we can identify it as such and do whatever it takes to pull close to God again."

If it is a secondary or defensive emotional response that is covering hurt, shame, or fear, then we can identify the deeper source of hurt and focus on it.

But when anger at God is the primary emotion and it seems justified – e.g., "we are troubled by the presence of suffering and injustice in the world" and think that God is at fault – another response is needed. There are no easy answers to people's questions about the brokenness of the world. "Probably no single theological solution will be helpful for everyone. And when people are in crisis, we may serve them better by simply listening and acknowledging their pain, rather than trying to correct their theological views," she notes. Instead, she emphasizes the role of trust: "The problems of evil and suffering are big ones, and I do not have the answers. But that is all right, because I believe that I have a true relationship with God. This is a relationship where I can continue to bring up tough issues. I trust that, over time, deeper truth will be revealed to me in response to these big questions."

Study Questions

1. Why does Julie Exline believe that when someone feels angry at God, it is important for them to share this emotion with others? What sort of response do they need from others?
2. Why is it important for people to examine their anger at God very closely? Consider how you could do this, and how you could help others do this.
3. In Psalm 42, how does the psalmist express anger and other negative emotions against God? How are these emotions embedded in a context of trusting God?

Departing Hymn: "God of My Life, to You I Call" (vv. 1 and 2)

God of my life, to you I call;
afflicted, at your feet I fall;
when the great water floods prevail
leave not my trembling heart to fail!

Friend of the friendless and the faint,
where should I lodge my deep complaint?
Where but with you, whose open door
invites the helpless and the poor!

William Cowper (1779), alt.

Suggested Tunes: CANONBURY or OLD 100th

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Anger in the Christian Life

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 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To outline the features of anger and consider when it is morally appropriate to feel anger.
2. To distinguish the vice of anger from the morally appropriate instances of anger, and consider how the vice develops.
3. To discuss how art can help us express righteous anger.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory” locate the familiar tune CWM RHONDDA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Bob Roberts offers this witty vignette to guide our reflection on the nature of anger and its role within a loving relationship. “Molly and Mort have been married since Monday. For months they have planned a honeymoon tour of Kansas. On Tuesday they got as far as Indianapolis. They bedded down in a comfortable motel that served an early breakfast, and were set to make Topeka by night fall on Wednesday. Molly has heard so much about Topeka. She is sure this is going to be a perfectly wonderful beginning to a storybook honeymoon. But now Mort, returning to the room, has a sheepish look on his face.

“‘What’s up?’ Molly asks. ‘Are we all ready to go?’ ‘I’m awfully sorry,’ says Mort. ‘For safe keeping I set the keys to the rental car just inside the trunk while I loaded it. And you know when I next remembered they were there? It was the split second before I heard that trunk lid snap shut as firm and final as my decision to marry my little Molly-melon.’ To hide his embarrassment, interrupt the line of vision between their eyes, and protect himself from the emotion that he feels rising like a mighty tide in his sprightly bride, he approaches her for a kiss. (Mort, I might mention, is more mellow than Molly.)

“Molly is in no mood for kisses, and becomes less so when they discover that the locksmith is not available until 4:00 p.m. The hope of Topeka by nightfall is dead. Molly is mad. Not to be able to get to Topeka tonight is very bad. You could say she is frustrated: the circumstances are contrary to her wishes. You could also say she is disappointed: she was expecting something wonderful and now sees that it will not happen. But her emotion is more than irritation or disappointment. It is anger. In addition to seeing the circumstances as bad, she sees somebody as culpable.” (*Anger*, pp. 11-12)

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 responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins each section; after a few moments for silent petitions and confessions, the leader calls everyone to respond “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.”

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:21-5:2 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The role of anger in the Christian life seems problematic: when is it a necessary spur to recognize and confront evil, and when does it become a capital vice, or “deadly sin,” we must avoid? In this study we consider the essential features of the emotion of anger in order to explain when an *episode* of the emotion is morally appropriate and useful, and when it goes wrong. The *vice* of anger arises from repeated instances of anger, even righteous anger, which are not properly examined and expressed. In the next study guide, “Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger,” we will survey remedies for this vice.

If members want to learn more about the roles that emotions play in the Christian life, encourage them to read Bob Roberts’s *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*, which is reviewed in Trevor Thompson’s *Bringing Anger into the Light*. Thompson introduces other resources to understand the particular emotion of anger.

Study Questions

1. When one feels the *emotion* of anger, according to Roberts, one:
 - casts blame on someone (the offender),
 - wants that person to be hurt,
 - sees the person as unattractive, and
 - sees oneself as in a position to judge the offender.

Invite four small groups to brainstorm concrete examples in which just *one* of the features goes wrong – e.g., either the person is not at all (or not fully) blameworthy; one desires to hurt the person too much, or too little, or for the wrong reason, etc.; one exaggerates the person’s unattractiveness and ignores their goodness or their extenuating circumstances; or one is not really in a position to judge the offender.

Of course, we often make errors of judgment or perception in regard to several of the features at once. Consider why we make mistakes in regard to each one.

2. Members might identify failures of attention, knowledge, or caring in regard to each feature: e.g., in regard to the first, one might *not notice* an offense, *not know* the behavior is blameworthy, or *not care* that it is occurring (to this person, that group, regarding that thing); in regard to the second, one might *not know* how to punish the person properly, *not care* if they change their bad behavior, or *not care* if they are punished too much; in regard to the third, one might *not attend to* or *not know* the person’s good qualities and any extenuating circumstances, or *not care* about the whole person and her story; in regard to the last, one might *not attend to* or *not know* one’s own sinful condition, lack of insight, or biased perceptions, or *not care* enough about holding oneself and others to moral standards. Discuss concrete cases of passivity and lack of anger when there is clear injury and offense to oneself or others.
3. Roberts imagines Molly developing the vice of anger by nursing her feelings anger (the righteous as well as the inappropriate ones) for twenty years. “She gets mad only about things that affect her directly [or she takes personally], and in those cases she is quite indiscriminate.” About many other important things that should make her angry, she is oblivious. She also exaggerates real offenses, and nurses her angry feelings by imagining the offenders are “heinous and underhanded and irresponsible and despicable” and without any excuses. “Their good qualities become invisible to her.” She is too intent on making offenders suffer, and positively relishes the feeling of being morally superior to them. In sum, Molly’s patterns of attention, her self-knowledge, and her concerns have become so distorted that she is increasingly incapable of feeling anger in an appropriate way.
4. Nathan Corbitt identifies two important roles that these creative people – Jamaine Smith, Hannah Poon, and Natalie Hoffman – fulfill through their artwork: the *prophetic role* of “providing a window to the reality of our world” that allows us “to see ourselves at our best, and our worst” and calls us to action, and the *therapeutic role* of helping “survivors of abuse, torture, and trafficking” articulate and move beyond their anger.

Departing Hymn

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

Getting Rid of Inappropriate Anger

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce three practices from the early Christian tradition for resisting episodes of inappropriate anger.
2. To consider how these anger antidotes are effective in changing our habits of attention and perception.
3. To review depictions of inappropriate anger in Christian art and story.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

Bob Roberts often uses the famous nineteenth-century illusion drawing of the young girl and old woman to illustrate the role of perception in anger. (For the original drawing, see “Young Girl and Old Woman Optical Illusion,” www.opticalillusioncollection.com/2011/08/young-girl-and-old-woman-optical.html. Many contemporary variations are available on the Internet.) He writes, “If you look at the drawing one way, you see an ugly old woman with a large nose and pursed lips. If you look at it in another way, you see a beautiful young woman with a little turned-up nose looking coyly away from you. This change is known as a gestalt switch: the perceived difference is a matter not of seeing different details but of seeing the whole thing (‘gestalt’) in a different way. There are two different whole pictures. The two views blot each other out: when you are seeing the ugly woman, the beautiful one is invisible, and when you are seeing the beautiful one, the ugly woman is invisible.

“If you are able to see the drawing both ways, then any time you are seeing the ugly woman you are on the verge of seeing the beautiful one. All you have to do is switch gestalts. But some people are more inclined to see the ugly lady, and others more inclined to see the pretty one. You might say their gestalt switching has different default modes.”

Our looking at other persons in love or anger has a similar switch. Roberts explains, “An important part of love is seeing what is good in the beloved, appreciating him or her, taking pleasure in his company, finding her to be lovely, wonderful, clever, and sweet. But anger makes the other appear, for the moment, a bit repulsive, defective, and deformed” (Anger, 12-13). As we become an angry person, our switch can get stuck in the default mode of anger: we become disposed to focus on others’ defects and blameworthiness, and neglect their loveliness.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members grow in humility, gentleness, and patience in their dealings with one another and others.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:1-6 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study guide, “Anger in the Christian Life,” focuses on when anger is appropriate and helpful in the Christian life, and when it becomes inappropriate. This companion study guide reviews three specific practices – watchfulness, developing virtues, and prayer – that helped desert Christians resist inappropriate anger. This discussion of these anger antidotes, especially the emphasis on how they adjust our patterns of attention and perception in anger-causing situations, presupposes the analysis of anger in the previous study.

Study Questions

1. In the journal we record the *cause* and *intensity* of episodes of anger when they occur, and later *review their appropriateness*. We look for the recurring cues for anger and patterns in our response to these cues. The goal is knowledge “not simply...of the *human* condition, but of *my* condition,” Ryan West writes. “And my knowledge cannot simply be a matter of ‘knowing the facts’ about myself, but must include ‘heart knowledge,’ a measure of motivating insight about my inner life that includes repentance and desire to change.” With such *personal* knowledge, we can work toward new patterns of attention, perception, and response.
2. “*On-the-spot* prayers” are brief prayers that we pray out of habit in anger-causing situations. West commends this variation on the Jesus Prayer: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on *us sinners*.” Such prayer becomes part of our automatic, second nature response to anger cues. We don’t stop to ask “Is this offender a person for whom Christ died?” “Am I, too, a sinner?” Rather, we pray (silently) and perceive the offender and ourselves in these terms.
“*Off-the-spot* prayers” occur at other times, but are carefully crafted to prepare us to respond appropriately in anger-causing situations. We can pray these prayers regularly in personal devotion or in public worship. West commends Mother Theresa’s daily prayer. We might also regularly think of our tendency to inappropriate anger as we pray the Lord’s Prayer (“lead us not into temptation of *anger*”), or prayers of confession, and so on.
3. Breaking our bad habits of attention and perception, and forming good habits in their place are very important. If we want to rid ourselves of inappropriate anger, we must respond differently in anger-causing situations. We may have little time to think about and plan a response; we will simply react to anger cues. These antidotes can help shape our “first thoughts” about ourselves, the offender(s), and mitigating features in these situations.
Review each antidote to see how it makes us aware of bad habits, and forms us in good habits of responding to offense.
4. As we meditate on the stories of the desert Christians, we see deeper layers of interpretation and application to our lives. These suggestive stories cannot be reduced to simple ‘points.’ Members might notice that the problem of anger goes with the brother when he leaves the community of people who are irritating him. Is his restlessness a result or a cause of his irritability? His quick trigger to anger is humorously revealed in his projecting human qualities on the water jug – it is offending him! His destruction of the water jug is so out-of-place that it brings him “to his senses”; what do you think he notices about the situation, himself, and so on? The idea of a “demon of anger” may seem odd to us. Are there personal beings that tempt us? What other things outside us – personal enemies, cultural patterns, and so on – drag us toward irritability, no matter where we are or whom we are with?
5. Heidi Hornik wonders whether the anger is the cause or result of the figure’s damnation in Giorgio Vasari’s *The Damned Soul*. Vasari highlights the bodily disturbance associated with anger, which suggests the anger is (now) beyond the control of the person’s reason. The person looks crazed and inflamed by things beyond himself. His ‘look’ is deadly toward others; there seems to be no concern for the damage this expression of anger might do to himself or to others.

Departing Hymn

“Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus” is on pp. 53-55 of Anger. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Jesus and Anger: Does He Practice What He Preaches?

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 evaluate the Gospel accounts of Jesus' anger in light of his strong condemnation of anger in the Sermon on the Mount.
2. To consider how Jesus' emotional responses in these accounts can be a model for our anger.
3. To discuss how Jesus' cleansing of the Jerusalem temple is depicted in art and used as a teaching subject during the Counter Reformation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Anger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Conundrum

While any idea of an enraged, flushed-faced, tantrum-throwing Jesus is disturbing, so is an image of our Lord as incapable of feeling any anger in response to the foulest, most mean-spirited offense to God or others. This is why we must tread carefully in interpreting the Gospel accounts of Christ's teachings and actions.

On the one hand we have Christ's plain teaching: "I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22a). (A few translations still follow some manuscripts that say "angry without cause," but interpreters have known for centuries that qualification is an addition to soften the starkness of the warning.) On the other hand, in several stories Christ appears to feel anger and to express his anger. So, we have to ask, does Christ practice in these stories what he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount to his disciples? Can we interpret his teachings and actions together in a way that each illumines the other?

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:21-26 and John 2:13-17 from a modern translation.

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 aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Reflection

Jesus is a model of true humanity. So, it makes sense to study to his emotional responses and actions, in addition to his teachings, for guidance in dealing with anger. Stephen Voorwinde surveys the occasions in which Jesus seems to be angry. Voorwinde adopts a high view of Jesus' divinity and foreknowledge, and takes into account Jesus' strong condemnation of anger in the Sermon on the Mount. These two interpretive moves make the passages especially problematic, but they also open interesting routes for understanding the sources of Jesus' anger and his reasons for expressing it so strongly.

Study Questions

1. Form four small groups to review the stories in the four sections of the study guide and Stephen Voorwinde's article. Encourage members to ask: What causes Jesus to become angry? Does he act with derision or contempt toward anyone? Does he say or do too much, toward the wrong people, and so on? Does he harbor ill-feeling?

Voorwinde interprets Jesus' teaching that "everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:22) in context. He writes, "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."

2. Sometimes Jesus' anger is *generated*, in part, by his insight into others' motivation and foreknowledge of their actions, Voorwinde suggests. Thus, he knows some religious leaders in Capernaum are plotting to destroy him, and he knows the man healed from leprosy and the men healed of blindness are going to disobey him, and thereby endanger himself, his disciples, and their mission. In some cases, the object of his anger is his adversary, Satan, who is plotting his death. The case in which Jesus is clearly angry at disciples has a more ordinary source in their obvious disobedience. On these readings, Jesus does not get angry without good reason, or at someone who has done nothing wrong, and so on.

Regarding Jesus' *expression* of anger, Voorwinde believes that 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."

3. In Scarcella's dramatic *Christ Driving the Money Lenders from the Temple*, the money lenders along with the sheep, birds, and cattle are shown scattering before Christ who is swinging a "whip of chords" above his head. One man reaches for a huge bag of coins spilled into the center foreground beside an upended table. "During the Catholic Reformation, this scene...became a symbol of the Church's need to cleanse itself both through the condemnation of heresy and through internal reform," Heidi Hornik reports. The focus was put on "Jesus' motive of 'zeal for [God's] house' rather than momentary anger." We might use this famous story in a similar way to motivate discerning reform of Christian churches and institutions.

Departing Hymn

'Answer When We Call, Lord Jesus' is on pp. 53-55 of *Anger*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Divine Wrath and Human 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 outline how early Christian theologians interpreted scriptural references to God's wrath.
2. To consider the dangers of projecting human fury onto God.
3. To discuss how divine wrath and human anger are depicted in the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Anger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Oh Come, My Soul, Sing Praise to God Our Maker" locate the familiar tune TIDINGS in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Quote

The theologian John Cassian (c. 360-435) taught that "the deadly poison of anger...must be totally uprooted from the depths of our soul." He thought that a literal reading of Scripture passages about God's wrath was especially pernicious. "We have heard that some people try to excuse this most destructive disease of the soul [the vice of wrath] by attempting to extenuate it by a rather detestable interpretation of Scripture," Cassian warned. "They say that it is not harmful if we are angry with wrongdoing brothers, because God himself is said to be enraged and angered with those who do not want to know him or who, knowing him, disdain him." Cassian believed the language of Scripture is rather oblique on this point: it does not mean to say that God sometimes is angry, but that wrongdoers who properly fear God's righteous judgment sometimes project anger onto God. (He noted a parallel phenomenon occurs in human courtrooms: even though a righteous judge carries out a fair sentence with mildness and gentleness of spirit, wrongdoers mistakenly believe the judge is filled with cruelest anger.)

It would take "too long if we chose to explain everything in Scripture that is said figuratively and in human terms about God," Cassian concluded. "Let it suffice to have said this much with respect to our current concern, which is directed against the vice of wrath, so that no one may, through ignorance, derive the wherewithal for sickness and everlasting death from the very place [i.e., Scripture] where holiness, immortal life, and the medicine of salvation are obtained." (John Cassian, *Institutes*, 8.1-4)

Regardless of whether we agree with Cassian's view that anger is always wrong (and, we should note, our difference of opinion on this may be mostly terminological), does he have a legitimate concern about the misuse of Scripture? Are we tempted to read biblical accounts of God's wrath as justifying our inordinate fury and uncontrolled outbursts against wrongdoers?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will give you spiritual insight to interpret difficult Scripture passages regarding divine wrath.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Exodus 32:1-20 and 34:1-9 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The other studies in this series focus on *human* anger – its causes, spiritual dangers, and sometime positive role in the life of discipleship. This study turns to the scriptural references to *divine* wrath. Often we are tempted to project human fury onto God and, in turn, use references to God's wrath to justify our own inordinate anger. This unhealthy connection between divine wrath and human anger is widespread today. Michael McCarthy points to resources in the Christian tradition that can help us resist it.

Study Questions

1. Michael McCarthy surveys these theologians because North Africa in late antiquity “produced a form of Christianity with a distinct temperament.” Africans had worshiped Saturn, a demanding god they called “The Old Man.” He was not a loving father, but a stern taskmaster who (in the words of W. C. H. Frend) was “capable of the worst human passions, of implacable jealousy, rage, and desire for vengeance.” Thus, McCarthy notes, “A spirit of religious intensity, a concern for purity, and an emphasis on submission to the divine will antedated conversion but also endured through the persecution of the church. North Africa, with its stress on martyrdom and the multiple divisions among Christians after persecution, yielded a religiosity where both human and divine rage remained ever a threat.” To avoid projecting human anger onto God, North African thinkers adopted one of two strategies: a few (like Arnobius) denied that God experienced anger, but most (like Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine) claimed a radical difference between divine wrath and human anger.
2. The passages that mention divine wrath are written to teach important lessons to readers. For Tertullian, the Bible speaks of God's wrath in order to communicate God's goodness, justice, and willingness to save. Lactantius takes a similar line, and then adds another teaching purpose: mention of God's wrath stirs fear in humans that discourages them from foolishness and crime. Likewise, Augustine sees divine wrath as an aspect of God's justice. Yet it is not an emotional disturbance in God, but is the divine judgment against sin. McCarthy explains, “God's anger, therefore, is not unlike the simulated wrath of a Stoic or Epicurean sage, who never suffers disturbance, yet who gives the impression of being angry because of its salutary effect on others. Just like the sage, God can always mete out just punishment without being inflamed.” Of these three theologians, Augustine is the one most interested in the effect that the language of divine wrath has on human responses. Such passages can stir zeal in good persons to take the sin and rebellion of others seriously and to act against those persons and their damage to the creation. For sinners, on the other hand, these passages can be the darkening of their minds.
3. Encourage members to mention examples from history and cases from recent news of people and nations who claimed that God's wrath justified their violence.
4. Domenico Beccafumi's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law* depicts Moses smashing the second tablet of commandments (Exodus 32:19), as there are pieces of the first one already strewn over the rock. The calf is shown in silhouette in the middle of the composition. None of the figures is clearly Joshua (who is in conversation with Moses just before and after this event), but all around there are reveling people who now draw back from Moses in fear. The image does not depict the events before (e.g., the people grumbling and then urging Aaron to make the calf; Moses assuaging God's wrath on Mount Sinai) or after (Moses grinding down the calf and making the people drink its dust; God giving another copy of the commandments; Moses singing praise to God for being slow to anger and ready to forgive the people). Yet there are suggestions of the wider story: the man and woman in the foreground are reminders of the people's “reveling” before the calf, and the child may foreshadow the spiritual damage done to their children and children's children (Exodus 34:7).

Departing Hymn

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

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.

Getting Angry at God

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
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 consider why people become angry at God.
2. To highlight the dangers of ignoring and suppressing anger toward God.
3. To discuss how faithful friends can help others deal with their anger toward God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 “God of My Life, to You I Call” locate one of the familiar tunes CANONBURY or OLD 100th in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

Julie Exline reports, “Large-scale survey data in the United States suggests a clear pattern: a large proportion of the U.S. population—between one-third and two-thirds, depending on the study—report that they are sometimes angry at God. And when people focus on specific events involving suffering (for example, the loss of a loved one, or a cancer diagnosis), usually about half of them endorse some anger or other negative feelings toward God in response.

“Many cases of anger toward God arise in response to major life crises, deaths, and natural disasters. But even smaller-scale events can lead to anger. For example, in our studies of undergraduates, anger toward God often comes in response to stressful but non-traumatic events such as romantic breakups, athletic injuries, or failing grades. In fact, low-level irritation toward God might only require a few pesky daily events: a stomach virus, a traffic jam, or rain on the day of a picnic. Apparently, any negative event that can be attributed to God may seem like fair game. It does not take a tsunami for someone to get angry at the Creator.” (*Anger*, 65-66)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give members confident trust and wisdom when they deal with their or others’ anger toward God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 42 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this series, we are thinking of anger as an emotional response to perceived injustice. Bob Roberts identifies four features of anger: “Anger involves casting blame on someone; wanting that person to be hurt; seeing the person as unattractive; and seeing oneself as in a position to judge” (*Anger*, 13). Lots of people get angry at God. Of course, many of them, upon closer self-examination, come to see this anger as clearly inappropriate or as a disguise for another negative emotion they feel. Yet some continue to think they should be angry with God. How can we best respond? Julie Exline offers pastoral advice about how we should deal with our own anger at God, and how we can help other people deal with theirs.

Study Questions

1. Julie Exline mentions two reasons why people should let trusted friends and believers know about their anger at God. First, people need reassurance that their anger at God is compatible with love for God. Obviously, unresolved anger tends to push us away from God and see God as unattractive, but anger that is acknowledged and resolved can draw us closer to God. Mature believers can model a trusting relationship with God that has room for feeling and expressing negative emotions toward God. Second, those who know the people well can help them examine their anger more carefully than they can by themselves. (More about this in the next question.)

People who are angry at God need to experience welcome and reassurance. If they feel shamed or rejected, they may suppress their anger at God. She explains, "To the extent that people reported supportive responses to their disclosures of anger at God, they were more likely to report that they had approached God and that their faith had grown stronger as a result of the incident. However, to the extent that people reported receiving unsupportive responses, they tended to stay angry. They were also more likely to try to suppress their angry feelings and to do more dramatic things to exit from the relationship, such as rebelling against God or rejecting God. In addition, they were more likely to report using alcohol or other drugs to cope. In terms of helping people resolve their anger toward God, then, a valuable first step simply may be to provide a supportive, non-shaming response if someone reveals such feelings to us."

Notice that Exline is concerned about people who *suppress* their anger at God by distracting themselves (and others) from it by doing the right things – e.g., they "pray the right prayers, read the right things, serve God with humility and obedience." This is quite different from acknowledging one's anger, deciding that it is inappropriate or a disguise, and then using these practices to train new habits of obedience, trust, and intimacy.

2. Exline says it is important to understand whether one's anger, on closer inspection, seems clearly inappropriate, is a disguise for another negative emotion, or is an emotional response to one's deep concern for justice and honest doubts about God's goodness in a particular situation. These three conditions require different responses.

You might form two groups – one to approach the problem from the angry person's side, and the other from the helping friend's side. Invite the first group to brainstorm what they would do, and what help they would want from their congregation, to examine their anger. Invite the second group to examine how the congregation currently helps people deal with their anger at God – e.g., through worship, study groups, informal and formal counseling, etc. Compare the groups' reports: How is your congregation prepared to meet the needs of those who are angry at God? If there are unmet needs, how can you address them?

3. The psalmist complains bitterly to God, "Why have you forgotten me" (Psalm 42:9) and allowed my enemies to oppress me? This oppression has been going on for a while, and other people (certainly the enemies, but perhaps even some of the psalmist's friends) have begun to wonder and taunt "Where is your God?" (42:3) Yet the psalmist's complaint about God's absence is surrounded by statements of trust in God (42:1-2, 11). This trust is bolstered, in part, by memories of festival worship (42:4), looking around at the blessing of God through the land (42:6), and moments of personal reflection on God and worship (42:8).

Invite members to share how public worship, personal reflection on Scripture, and a sense of God's presence in their surroundings have helped them respond to their own anger at God. How can they best share these resources with others who are angry at God?

Departing Hymn

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