

## 4.

# Anger and Bitterness

‘Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord’ (Eph. 6:4). In one sentence, the apostle Paul teaches us several important truths about anger. The emotional response of anger is something that is provoked out of our hearts by people and situations. Parents can sinfully provoke or tempt their teenagers to respond in anger. And, Biblical training, instruction, and discipline are essentials for the prevention of and solution to anger in our teenagers. Paul’s inerrant counsel to parents is just the beginning of what God’s Word has to say about anger, and its more stubborn cohort, bitterness. While it is often assumed that explosive expressions of anger, and all sorts of other angst, is just normative during the teenage years, that doesn’t mean it is somehow healthy or acceptable. Sinful anger and bitterness are part of the human condition, which require that they be handled Biblically.

## Opening *PORTRAITS*

- Andy is a 14-year-old who typically appears as a pretty easy-going teen. Yet, when he is teased or told ‘no’ too many times by his parents, his veins nearly pop out of his neck and his fists clench. Just recently he punched a hole in his bedroom wall when he was grounded from video games for a month.

- 17-year-old Beverly says she never gets angry, even after years of friends rejecting her and being on the outside of her youth group. Instead, she is just ‘hurt’ and will never make the mistake again of trusting another person.
- Carl, a 16-year-old, is often sarcastic, cynical, and downright moody. He talks a lot about life being unfair, people being ‘idiots,’ and God not being very good at His ‘job.’ When Carl is confronted, he claims to only be joking.

## Typical **PROBLEMS**

### 1. Sinful Anger

People use a variety of words and idioms to describe the expression of anger. ‘You make my blood boil.’ ‘You are such a hothead.’ ‘I’m doing the slow burn.’ Rather than looking at them as different types of anger problems, it’s more helpful to view them as a variety of *intensities* on two different *directional* spectrums: anger directed **outward** and anger directed **inward**. All forms of anger typically emerge when an essential goal of ours is blocked. Here are descriptions of the two anger spectrums:

**1a. Externalized Anger (blowing up).** Since this type of anger is outwardly expressed, this anger spectrum is the most obvious to us. It is also referred to as ‘ventilation,’ as angry words are said (or yelled) and angry actions are on display (hitting, punching, etc.) It appears to be the most violent of all expressions of anger, at least in the moment. On the ‘low’ intensity end of the spectrum, we use terms like:

- Annoyance
- Exasperation
- Indignation
- Irritation
- Mad

Then, on the ‘high’ intensity side of externalized anger, we have terms such as:

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Temper tantrum

Rage

Wrath

Infuriation

Whether anger is externalized at a lower intensity or a much higher intensity, it can do great damage to other people, property, or self. Blowing up, or venting anger, is a teenage problem that must be solved.

**1b. Internalized Anger (stuffing down).** The much more socially acceptable forms of anger expression occur on the ‘internalization’ spectrum. Rather than blowing up, the teenager stuffs all his anger deep down inside. Another descriptive term for this anger response is ‘clamming up.’ On this spectrum, the teen could have a low level of anger turned inward, or a more intense anger that he or she is attempting to stuff down. Some of the typical terms used for this sort of anger (in order of intensity) are:

- Disappointment
- Hurt
- Annoyance
- ‘Stewing’
- Resentment

While some may argue that internalizations of anger are not sinful, but are actually demonstrations of restraint or even self-control, this spectrum is still problematic. For one thing, they can be expressions of unforgiveness. Stuffing down anger can also lead to other problems, most notably depression, passive-aggressiveness, and relationship issues.

## **2. Bitterness**

In one sense, bitterness can be understood as occurring at the furthest extreme of the ‘internalized anger’ spectrum—just above resentment. When a teen makes a routine practice of stuffing down his anger, then, in the end, it will become bitterness. Bitterness is long-term anger, which cripples the heart and soul. As described in Hebrews 12:15,

it is a chronic attitude that takes root in the heart, causing relational divisions.

Yet, if we only see bitterness from this vantage point, then it would appear that teens who externalize their anger never suffer from bitterness. That is not the case. Even when a person blows up in anger and seemingly ‘vents’ it all out, bitterness can still ensue. That means sinful anger and bitterness can both be present whether a person typically externalizes anger or most often internalizes anger.

Bitterness occurs when there is unforgiveness present in the heart or unresolved anger which becomes long standing. It is also produced in the heart when relationships are not reconciled. Bitterness also produces more complicated problems like depression, as well as physical health issues. Ultimately, it can create distance in all relationships, including his or her relationship with God.

## Evaluation *PERSONALIZATION*

For each teenage problem, good questions must be asked in order to evaluate comprehensively. We are always evaluating a person, not simply diagnosing a problem. Each teenager you counsel will have unique variables in their lives that will impact the problem and solution. For the problems of anger and bitterness, here are the personal issues we need to listen for and evaluate:

### Anger pattern

1. Is the anger more externalized or internalized?
2. Is it on the lower end of the intensity spectrum, or the higher end?
3. Is it a chronic anger problem, or more specific to a current crisis (a blocked goal)?
4. How long has he or she been struggling with an anger problem?

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### **Presence of violence**

1. Are there violent words expressed in anger? Corrupt, foul language used?
2. Does the teen hit or destroy things in anger?
3. Is there physical violence, or threats of violence against another person?
4. Is there violence against self, or suicidal thoughts?
5. Has there been any criminal behavior?

### **Presence of bitterness**

1. Has the anger become long-standing?
2. Is there a particular person the teen is bitter towards?
3. Is there a particular situation or circumstance he is she is bitter about?

### **Physical factors**

1. Is the teen experiencing any physical health issues that relate to the anger problem?
2. Does the teen have any intellectual or physical disabilities?
3. Would a medical evaluation be helpful?
4. What is the status of the teen's eating, exercise, and sleeping habits?

### **Relational issues**

1. Is the anger targeted to a certain person, or group of people?
2. Who are his or her closest friends? Are they angry/bitter teens too?
3. Does he or she have Christian friends?
4. How does he or she relate to parents and siblings?
5. What about enemies?
6. Is he or she more social or withdrawn?

## Understanding of forgiveness

1. Who does the teen have trouble forgiving?
2. Does he or she have a Biblical understanding of forgiveness? Of grace?
3. Does he or she need to seek someone else's forgiveness?

## Cover up

1. Is the anger more of a secondary emotion, covering up deeper issues?
2. Is there underlying guilt or shame?
3. Is there deeper fear or anxiety?
4. Are there secret sins that need to be exposed?

## Relationship with God

1. Is the teen angry with God?
2. What about his or her devotional life? Prayer and Bible study?
3. What is the teen's basic understanding of God?
4. What about the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual maturity?

## Righteous anger

1. Has the teen been sinned against, and is righteously angry?
2. What part of the anger is righteous?
3. Has righteous anger turned into sinful anger?

## Other related problems

1. Is there any drug or alcohol use involved?
2. What about depression? Anxiety?
3. Are there any other related problems?

## Biblical *PRINCIPLES*

After listening and evaluating, the Biblical counseling process moves forward to compassionate confrontation and edifying education. In order to offer wise counsel that gets to the heart of the matter, Biblical

principles of the problem must be understood and applied. It's just too easy to merely communicate our own opinions and experiences rather than the life-giving truth of God! So the following principles should operate as 'hooks' for your thoughts on the subject. They will keep you on the rails of Biblical truth, which the Holy Spirit can then use to bring heart change into the life of your teenager. Theories and ideas abound about how to solve the problems of anger and bitterness. Keep your focus on applying Biblical principles to the unique experience of the teen who is before you.

### **Acknowledge it**

The starting point for just about any problem is for a person to actually acknowledge there is a problem. This is certainly true for anger! You've probably heard people say things like, 'I don't get angry; I just get revenge.' Or, like in our opening portrait of Beverly, 'I'm not angry; I'm just hurt.' There are plenty of different words and idioms teenagers can use that either minimize or attempt to ignore the fact that they are actually angry. Do not allow your teen to deny it, but simply and clearly admit: 'I am angry!' Anger is not to be vented, stuffed, minimized or ignored. Only when it is acknowledged, can a Biblical course of action be taken. Only when your teen admits what particular situation or person is leading him or her to anger, can we gain understanding of what to do next.

In Ephesians 4:26-27, we read these words about anger: 'Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.' The apostle Paul is not simply commanding us to be angry. More importantly, he is communicating that our anger does not need to become sinful. In other words, we all get angry, but Christians do not have to allow anger to lead to sinful thoughts, words, and actions. So rather than believing (like Beverly) that ALL anger is sinful and so I must deny or downplay the fact that I'm angry—a right understating of Scripture shows that we can be angry and not sin in it!

Acknowledging anger will move the teen to address the issue that is fueling the anger in the first place.

### **Redirect it**

One of the main problems with our anger is that it often fails to accomplish God's purposes—succeeding only in creating other problems. When Carl, our cynical 16-year old, witnesses a good friend being bullied at school, this evokes anger in his heart. But, if Carl sinfully ventilates it by slashing the bully's car tires, some people may cheer, but this will only create further problems for Carl. If Carl chooses to simply stuff down his anger and gets resentful about how unfair the world is, he may just end up getting depressed. Instead, Carl needs to learn to redirect his anger to solve the actual problem which provoked his anger in the first place. Since God has given him a strong sense of justice, he must use his anger to pursue any and all righteous means of justice! If Carl didn't get angry about the suffering of his friend in the first place, he would have no motivation to help and make things right. Sinfully externalizing or internalizing will defeat the purpose of his anger.

So, when you are counseling your teen about their anger, it won't help to just say, 'Stop getting so angry!' When he or she is angry about an injustice being done—to self or someone else—communicating 'stop it' is akin to saying, 'Don't care so much.' Again, here's the key: Anger that is rooted in a response to injustice needs to be redirected. Blowing up or clamming up is a misuse of our anger. It directs our anger toward all the wrong things, which ends up enabling us to avoid the actual issues. Sometimes, your teen may simply be afraid to confront the problem. At other times it may feel like there is nothing that can be done. But the truth is, God wants His people to use anger that is rooted in a sense of justice to deal with the injustices in our lives and the lives of other people! Think about the actions that Carl can take in his anger. He can pray for the bully. He can report the bullying to the authorities. He can certainly defend his friend and confront the

bully, if God gives him the right opportunity and words. In the end, Carl can even end up being an anti-bullying advocate in his school! And this will keep Carl's anger from turning into cynicism, apathy, and bitterness—as he trusts more fully in God in the process.

### **Re-focus it**

When the sinful anger in the heart of a teen is more self-centered rather than solely rooted in a response to the injustices of this world, we have a different Biblical principle in play. Andy, our 14-year old, is a good example for us here. While he thinks being teased or being told 'no' by his parents is a great injustice, it really isn't. Andy is suffering from having his eyes on the wrong objects of his delight. To put it another way: He is seeking to find his joy in the wrong places, and is regularly disappointed. Andy believes that having his own way will make him happy and allow him to shed all his discontentedness. He also thinks that he must always be admired and respected, so that's why any teasing or joking hurts his pride and evokes his wrath. Our delights are often in all the wrong things: our sports teams, our hobbies, our relationships, our jobs, etc. All of these easily become idols that demand our total worship and allegiance.

As it is in Andy's case, anger erupts when some obstacle gets in the way of a delight or an idol, proving that it holds too much sway in our lives. Our anger calls us to re-focus on a much higher and better object of delight! As Christians we know that our delight is to always be in the Lord (Ps. 37:4). When we delight in Him, we can then truly enjoy our lesser delights, as well as put them in perspective. How do we teach Andy this truth, practically speaking? Instead of using his anger to attempt to get his own way, it should act as a 'check engine' light that forces him to admit he is seeking his joy in the wrong things. How much more delightful would it be if he simply submitted to his parents and obeyed them 'in the Lord?' When he is teased, he can look for ways to love his enemies, putting his joy into pleasing God and serving others (Matt. 5:44). In the end, Andy must get much less self-

centered and much more God-centered. His anger exposes his heart idols, allowing him to re-focus on a better source of delight.

### **Don't let the sun set**

Let's return to Ephesians 4 again for our next Biblical principle concerning anger: 'Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil' (Eph. 4:26-27). This text is often effectively used in marriage counseling, where Christian couples are exhorted to resolve their conflicts before going to bed. So how can we apply it to the typical anger of teens? Think about Beverly again. She certainly appears to be letting day after day go by with unresolved anger towards her friends in her heart. This 'stuffed-down' anger has hardened into bitterness, creating a resolution to never allow friends to reject her again. Any righteous anger has long ago become sinful, simply based on the fact that she has let the sun go down on her anger. Because of this failing on Beverly's part, she has given opportunity for the devil to create havoc in her life.

This Biblical principle reminds us that we must deal with what is causing anger in our hearts now! Remember, the God-given emotion of anger moves us to passionately resolve the real problems in our lives or the lives of others. Unfortunately, unresolved anger in our lives, day after day, will end up controlling us instead. It gives the devil an opportunity to become lord over our hearts. So, after a hard time at a youth group event, Beverly needs to confront her angry and bitter thoughts immediately. As the Psalmist says: 'Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your hearts on your beds, and be silent' (Ps. 4:4). Beverly can literally sit on her bed, and think about how the Lord would have her respond. She can cry out to the Lord in her pain. She should seek His comfort and find her joy in Him. She has to think through how to act and what to say. Most importantly she must forgive, refusing to remain angry and bitter at her rejecting friends the rest of her life. Our teens need to be challenged to confront the anger that resides within their

hearts, meditate and think deeply about it, and sit in quietness before a sovereign and loving God.

### **Slow it down**

Anger has a way of moving the dial of our hearts, minds, and behaviors from a standard speed to a ‘flash forward, lightning’ speed. Think about Andy again. When teased, his blood begins to boil and his face immediately turns beet red. Almost immediately as the ‘no’ is emerging from his dad’s lip, his eyes flash, his fists clench, and the veins nearly pop out of his neck. Andy moves from a happy-go-lucky teen to the angry ‘Hulk’ in almost a split second. James recognizes this problem when he writes: ‘Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God’ (James 1:19-20). Many of our teens become angry way too fast. It makes them appear to be all emotion, all hormones, with little rationality. But being fast to anger typically ends in some very unrighteous activities, often with deep regrets to follow.

Growing in the grace of God means learning to take more time to become angry. Anger that is unbridled has a way of racing out of control. It moves at the speed of light. It erupts, flashes, and burns like a fire. So like switching a movie from fast-forward to slow-motion, teens like Andy have to learn to slow down the process of his anger. When teasing comments are made, or he is being picked on, Andy needs to slowly think through towards a proper response. When he is told ‘no’ by his parents, he needs to stop and think, even walking away slowly to process what’s happening. Yes, this is easier said than done. It is a learning curve, requiring Andy to have the power of God in his heart and mind. He needs to hold on to Proverbs 14:29, ‘Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.’ A teen with a quick temper is the poster-child of foolishness and immaturity. Someone like Andy must be called upon to commit to the wise slow-down of all of his anger responses, with the help of the Spirit.

## Put off, put on

In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul describes the process of ‘putting off’ the old man and its behaviors, and ‘putting on’ the new man. In other words, as Christians, we are empowered by the Spirit to be able to stop old ways of living and start new ways—by God’s grace. When it comes to anger, one of the most significant behaviors to put off is revenge against those who have hurt us. Beverly could be plotting revenge against her friends who have ostracized her repeatedly. Andy may also be seeking revenge for all who have teased him. Both have to be taught to put off or put away our plans for revenge: ‘Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”’ (Rom. 12:19). This instruction will probably seem so foreign to their ears, as the world, their peers, and their sinful hearts celebrate revenge and make heroes out of human avengers. It often feels like revenge is the only response that will make us feel better. Revenge is sweet, right? But God’s Word tells the teen struggling with anger to put off revenge, and leave it for God, the perfect avenger.

But this Biblical principle is not just about stopping bad behavior, but also putting on God-glorifying behavior as well. If Andy or Beverly simply resist getting revenge (passively or aggressively), they will still not be experiencing real heart change for their anger. Listen to these difficult words of Jesus: ‘But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you’ (Luke 6:27-28). To become truly free of the effects of sinful anger, Andy and Beverly need to do the impossible (without Christ) thing and love their enemies, do good to them, bless them, and pray for them. When our anger is rooted in self-righteousness mixed with a strong sense of justice, this will not only seem impossible, but feel very unfair. Yet, God’s Word tells us that it is the right thing to do—not just for our enemies, but to solve the problems of an angry and bitter heart. Putting off revenge and putting on love is the Biblical

process that will reconcile our relationships rather than continue to destroy them.

### **Uproot bitterness**

In Hebrews 12:15, we learn the essential counsel on bitterness: ‘See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.’ Bitterness is long-term, stored-up sinful anger. It takes roots and hardens the heart, against people and even God. Think about Beverly again. Clearly, her bitterness is deeply impacting her own heart and mind. But consider what it is doing in her youth group. Instead of acting like brothers and sisters in the family of God, bitterness has sprung up and caused divisions within the group. Certainly, the other teens who are rejecting and ostracizing Beverly need to be challenged and confronted. They need to learn how to love God and other people. But Beverly’s stored-up bitterness is contributing to the problem as well. It is easy to imagine that, even if the friends in her youth group repent and change their ways, Beverly still may refuse to forgive and risk reconciliation. Bitterness tries to convince us that we must protect our own hearts and not open up to people again.

Hebrews 12:15 also connects bitterness to a failure to obtain the grace of God. Bitterness is the opposite of grace, because it holds other people to very rigorous standards. Out of the pain in our teenager’s heart, he or she can simply refuse to show grace and love to others. This is a demonic deception that will keep us from the grace of God, only creating further problems. Since it is connected to grace, the only solution is forgiveness, as the apostle Paul expresses it: ‘Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you’ (Eph. 4:32). The very essence of God’s grace is His willingness to forgive sinners in His Son, Jesus Christ. Beverly needs to know and remember how much she has been forgiven. She needs to learn to forgive those who have wronged her. Then, she will need to be challenged even further: to be kind and tenderhearted

to those who have been unkind and mean-spirited. While we can certainly be sympathetic towards Beverly in her suffering, dealing with the bitterness is vital for her heart as well as her present and future relationships.

### **Exercise self-control**

The fruit of the Holy Spirit known as self-control, or self-discipline, is absolutely necessary for just about any teenage problem (Gal. 5:23). Anger, in its outwardly explosive forms, seeks to aggressively control others. Internalized anger can also attempt to exert control over the lives of others, in more passive-aggressive ways. But, then, anger ends up controlling the angry person, keeping him or her captive and hurting. Andy may end up getting so violent in his anger, that he forces his parents to give in and give him his way. Beverly might figure out how to manipulate members of her youth group in passive-aggressive ways. Carl could easily use his negativity and pessimism to get people to feel sorry for him. For all our teenage friends: what is the cost of controlling others? Using anger to have others revolve around our desires, our needs, and our interests is a tough way to live. And, if these habits don't begin to break in the teenage years, it is will be a rough road ahead. Proverbs 25:28 puts it this way: 'A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.'

Therefore, the solution to teens using their anger to control others (and thereby being controlled by it) is growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Rather than trying to control their situations, our young people need to learn to trust in God's total control of all things. It is only God's Spirit who can give us that trust, as well as the strength, to control our anger. Teens need to learn that lacking self-control of their anger leaves them vulnerable to the work of Satan as well as being controlled by other people. Andy is allowing the teasers in his life to control him. Beverly is allowing her so-called friends to control her too. Like a city without walls, the teen without self-control is left open to invaders of any kind. If your teen is a Christian, he or she can learn to exert control

by the power of the indwelling Spirit. Exercising Spirit-led self-control not only prevents long-term anger and bitterness, but potentially violent situations.

### **Righteous anger?**

A last Biblical principle for counseling a teenager with anger and bitterness could have been the first: Check for the presence of righteous anger. As was noted earlier, Christians can be angry and not sin (Eph. 4:26). Being made in the image of God, we can emulate His righteous anger, especially when we are responding to injustice. Your teen may be righteously angry over the mistreatment of a friend. He or she may have righteous wrath over being treated unfairly or being a victim of abuse. Your teen may even be righteously angry over his or her sin! Typically, most of us tend to think all of our anger is righteous—or at least mostly righteous. But, if we are honest, most of our anger is pretty self-serving and unrighteous. Yet, it is still vital to help your teen discern if he or she is experiencing righteous anger.

Unfortunately, as sinful human beings, even our righteous anger can quickly degenerate into sinful anger. It gets tainted by our self-righteousness, unrealistic expectations, and false judgments. We can become impatient, and take matters into our sinful hands. We can make the situation all about ourselves, rather than the glory of God. So while you need to help your teenager recognize righteous anger, you also must help him or her see how even his or her righteous acts are like dirty rags (Isa. 64:6). And then, challenge him or her to work on keeping the anger righteous, following Biblical principles. In the end, only our Savior expressed righteous anger all the time, for all the right reasons. As with all human problems, they should humble us in comparison to the greatness and glory of King Jesus.

## **Wisdom POINTERS**

If we want our teenagers to pursue hearts of wisdom, then we will have to counsel them wisely. It's one thing to operate from Biblical

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presuppositions, to understand an effective counseling process, and to know Biblical principles concerning a problem—but quite another to apply them all wisely. So, a Biblical analysis of each teenage problem will end with some ‘wisdom pointers’—some ‘do’s and don’ts’—to help counsel your teen wisely. When dealing with the problems of anger and bitterness:

- Do communicate the love of Christ for sinners.
- Don’t confront your teen’s anger with your own anger.
- Do show true compassion for the pain the teen is experiencing.
- Don’t excuse all anger as being simply a normal emotion.
- Do recognize when anger is actually righteous.
- Don’t just tell a teen to ‘stop it’ or that Christians don’t get angry.
- Do comfort a teen who has long-standing bitterness.
- Don’t offer techniques which ‘safely’ vent out the anger.
- Do help to redirect the teen’s anger to solve the real problem.
- Don’t allow the teen to deny, minimize, or ignore the anger.
- Do point to the power of the Spirit to produce self-control.
- Don’t ignore suicidal comments, even if said in anger.