

“The Mad That You Feel”

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²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2)

When “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” began to air nationally in 1968, it did not take long for letters to begin streaming in. One of those letters caught the host’s attention in a big way, because it was a question that every person – no matter how old – must confront. The little boy put the question this way: *“What do you do with the mad that you feel when you feel so mad you could bite?”*

Great minds through the ages have asked it, in one way or another. What do we do with anger? Prominent Quakers, famous for peace, simplicity, and non-violence, have promoted the idea that anger itself is bad – that the moral goal for a good person is to eliminate anger completely. The wordsmith Benjamin Franklin promoted pithy wisdom like, “Whatever is begun in anger ends in shame,”¹ and “Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one.”² William Penn followed suit, saying “It is he who is in the wrong who first gets angry.”³ Perhaps they were channeling the wisdom of the Psalms, which bids us to *“Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath... Do not fret—it leads only to evil.”*⁴

But even these guys had trouble drawing clear lines all the time, because Penn also said that “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”⁵ There were clearly things that made men like Franklin and Penn angry – angry enough to start a revolution. And we cannot help but note that the little boy who was fretting enough over anger to sit down and write Mr. Rogers a letter about it did not seem to question anger itself. He didn’t ask “How do I get rid of anger?” He asked *“What do I do with it? What do I do with the mad that I feel?”*

While it’s safe to say that this young lad had not yet read much Aristotle, he was already sitting down to a conversation that had kept the philosopher busy for years. Aristotle did not say that anger itself was bad. It was, to him, a moral ambiguity – an ethical neutral that could go in directions that were either good or bad. Everyone gets angry, Aristotle said.

¹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/benjamin_franklin_103758

² <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/1061/>

³ <http://www.picturequotes.com/it-is-he-who-is-in-the-wrong-who-first-gets-angry-quote-576488>

⁴ Psalm 37:8.

⁵ <http://www.picturequotes.com/rebellion-to-tyrants-is-obedience-to-god-quote-650860>



That's a given. It's easy to become angry. But to be angry "at the right things and towards the right people, and in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time,"⁶ that is the real discussion.

That, we have to say, is the same concern that is expressed in Ephesians. The letter does not say, "Never be angry." The letter says, "Be angry, but do not sin." It recognizes that anger can be both appropriate and useful. When we encounter injustice, for example, anger is an appropriate emotional response. In the Pixar movie "Inside Out," comedian Lewis Black was cast to play the emotion Anger. The choice speaks volumes, because a lot of Lewis Black's comedy is angry. In one promotional interview about the film, he actually mocks the other emotions of joy, fear, and sadness. "Those other emotions are all too touchy feely," he says. "Anger is all about getting the job done. Time to take action. So, don't get in his way, otherwise he might explode." But he also adds, "He only does it because he really cares."⁷

It's a pretty good summation of the way Jesus used his anger. When Jesus got angry, things got done. When Jesus got angry, lepers who had been ostracized were healed. When Jesus got angry, little children who had been shooed away were welcomed right into the middle of the circle. When Jesus got angry, people who suffered painful disabilities were healed and made whole. When Jesus got angry, tables of commerce that were polluting God's temple were turned over. Jesus's anger was all about getting the job done, about taking action in the face of situations that were not right. And when Jesus got angry, the world knew what he really cared about.

We, however, are not Jesus. Thank you, Captain Obvious. When Jesus got angry, he got angry "at the right things and towards the right people, and in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time." For us, anger seems much harder to control. As Aristotle said, when normal people get angry, we are like a dog barking at our owner before recognizing her. Maybe we will realize who it is, maybe we'll stand down, but maybe we won't. Sometimes, we embrace the anger... we like the anger... and so we don't channel it or let it go so easily.

Author and pastor Frederick Buechner said it this way:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.⁸

Anger, in the hands of us fallible humans, can be really caustic and dangerous. It can be useful, but it can get out of control easily. For example, in South Carolina, our plumbing was prone to clogs. When we did, I would go to the store and come home with a bottle of sulfuric acid. And it was almost always the bottle that had the most adjectives and prefixes on it: "Dual-Force Foaming Mega-Gel with Max Power Crystals Drano." This was no time

⁶ Niels Aslak Christensen, "Aristotle on Anger, Justice, and Punishment," Master Thesis, University College London, August 31, 2016,

⁷ "Meet Lewis Black as Anger in INSIDE OUT," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DtMdRhtlfk>

⁸ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking Transformed by Thorns, p. 117.

for touchy-feely squeeze bottles – it was time to get things done. But on that bottle there were also warnings. Use gloves. Wear eye protection. Keep kids and animals away. One bottle I found even came with a special storage bag to use after the container had been opened. It was obvious that whatever was in that bottle was extremely caustic and potentially dangerous. Yes, the substance took care of the clog, but it had to be contained and controlled, because if it wasn't, people could get hurt.

The same is true of anger. Especially in community. And that was always the primary focus of Ephesians – a letter that was addressed not to individuals, but to a community of faith. And the urgent call to that community was that they “maintain the unity of the Spirit.” There is one sentence at the beginning of chapter 4 that uses the word “one” seven times. What are we supposed to remember: that “there is one body and one Spirit... one hope of our calling... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” The goal of God’s people, the goal of the church, is to be ONE, and anger can be a caustic chemical if it is not used correctly. If we are not careful, anger can lead to resentment... anger can lead to bitterness... anger can lead to vengeance... and all of those things tear at the fabric of our unity.

And it’s important to say right here that this scripture is not founded on some Pollyanna wish that we would all be the same... that we would always think the same and speak the same and act the same. Every community, no matter how intimate it is, is going to have its differences, and a lot of time those differences will be around justice – what is right, what is wrong, how we should act. And wherever injustice exists there is going to be anger.

There is anger, for example, over terms like “Black Lives Matter,” “Blue Lives Matter,” and “All Lives Matter.” That anger, on all sides, is coming from a deep sense of injustice about how certain people are being treated. We have seen some really amazing progress in recent years that has opened up the eyes of many who have been blind to injustice on our streets, in our courts, in our economy, and in our hearts. But we have also seen some horrible and caustic responses that continue to burn, dissolve, and rip at the fabric of our community.

People in our country are also radically divided over politics and power. Our political system is based on difference and debate, and some really good decisions can come out of that crucible. But as we saw on January 6th, anger over injustices in our system can also spill over into actions that can only be described as despicable – actions that have nothing to do with *E Pluribus Unum*, but are simply acts of vengeance, bitterness, egoism, and violence that work to destroy our bond as one nation under God.

And now we are even coming apart over vaccines and masks. Some people are angry that they are still being asked to get a vaccine or even wear a mask, while others are furious that we even have to explain it anymore... that vaccines and mask-wearing are ethical acts of compassion... that these controls that we impose upon ourselves are necessary to protect the weak and vulnerable around us. Is this not a perfect example of what Ephesians must be talking about? That anger will always be, so we will always have to be careful about what we do with our anger, because if we use it wrong, people get hurt. Or, as in this case, people die.

So, we are still asking the same question that the little boy who wrote Mister Rogers asked. After all this time, we still don’t know what to do with the mad that we feel, when we feel so mad we could bite? I can’t think of a better way to conclude than the answer Mister

Rogers gave back in 1968. Like the author of Ephesians, he doesn't preach that anger should be avoided. He focuses instead on what we do with it.

In an early episode, he shared his own ethical approach. He said that, when he was a boy and would get angry or frustrated, he would go to the piano. He would put his hands on the low keys and bang out some angry sounds. As he grew as a musician, minor chords and melodies helped him express sadness. After a while, his anger may not be gone, but it had been channeled into something that could even be positive.

Then Mister Rogers shared a song that was directly inspired by this little boy's letter – a song that through the years would be included on the show no less than 38 times, a song that could simultaneously speak to a wondering child but also melt the heart of the United States Senate:⁹

*What do you do with the mad that you feel, when you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong... and nothing you do seems very right?*

*What do you do? Do you punch a bag? Do you pound some clay or some dough?
Do you round up friends for a game of tag? Or see how fast you go?*

*It's great to be able to stop, When you've planned a thing that's wrong,
And be able to do something else instead And think this song:*

*I can stop when I want to, Can stop when I wish.
I can stop, stop, stop any time.*

*And what a good feeling to feel like this, And know that the feeling is really mine.
Know that there's something deep inside, That helps us become what we can.
For a girl can be someday a woman, And a boy can be someday a man.¹⁰*

You know, we haven't even talked about the phrase that we most often associate with this passage – that we should “not let the sun go down” on our anger. It is still the lynchpin of a lot of marital counseling. And I'm not here to say that those counselors are wrong. I just worry that there are a lot of married couples who lose a lot of sleep trying to live up to that standard. And I think that tends to miss the real gist of what scripture is saying about anger... that anger is a fact of life and everyone experiences it... and that the goal with anger is not to eradicate it, or avoid feeling it, but instead to respond faithfully to it -- to know the reason for it, to seek the good in it, to try our best to bring some grace into it, and pray that some justice might just come from it.

That is what God wants us to do with the mad that we feel. May the Lord give us the will and the strength to imitate those who show us the Way. *Amen.*

⁹ http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/music/songs/what_do_you_do.html

¹⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20100308133459/http://pbskids.org/rogers/songLyricsWhatDoYouDo.html>