

Dear Phil

CARNAL VERSUS RIGHTEOUS ANGER

In the Holiness circles I grew up in, all anger was sin. I saw plenty of church people get angry, but they called it “righteous indignation.” If authority figures were questioned, they would get “righteously indignant” and say you were on your way to hell because “the Holy Ghost told me that, and who are you to question?” Is there a difference between carnal anger and righteous anger? —Tom

Dear Tom,

First, your question correctly assumes that there is such a thing as righteous anger. A lot of folks have heard it preached that all anger is sinful. That is not what the Bible teaches.

Consider the following Biblical data. The Bible tells us that God is angry with sinners (Isa. 34:2), and He becomes angry with His people when they dishonor Him (Deut. 1:34, 37). Jesus, our perfect example, experienced anger at the hardness of people’s hearts (Mark 3:5). Paul commands the Ephesians, “Be angry and don’t sin” (Eph. 4:26a). If God experiences anger, it cannot be an inherently sinful emotion. Since the Spirit inspired Paul to command believers to be angry and not to sin, it must be possible. On the other hand, just five verses later, Paul tells the Ephesians to put away all anger and wrath (Eph. 4:31). So, clearly there must be a difference between righteous and unrighteous anger.

There are at least three factors that determine whether anger is

righteous or unrighteous: its reason, its expression, and its duration. The duration of godly anger is short-lived. Specifically, God says regarding righteous anger, “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath” (Eph. 4:26). Any anger that is prolonged, harbored, or nursed is or becomes unrighteous anger.

How anger is expressed is the second factor that determines whether it is righteous or not. Godly anger is controlled anger. James directs us to be “slow to anger” (Jam. 1:19). The context of James 1:19 and my understanding of God’s anger suggest that this means “be slow to express or act upon anger.” Angry explosions do not “work the righteousness of God” (Jam. 1:20). Paul writes, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth ...” (Eph. 4:29a). It is possible to be angry for a righteous reason and yet fail to express that anger in a godly manner.

When righteous anger is expressed, it must be expressed in a manner that is “good for edification,” is “appropriate to the need

of the moment,” and that ministers “grace to the listener” (Eph. 4:29b). Paul goes on to say in verse 32 that we must be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving toward one another. When you are angry, if your verbal or non-verbal communication is not edifying, appropriate, gracious, kind, and tender-hearted, then regardless of how legitimate your anger is, you have sinned and need to ask God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of the person to whom you expressed your anger wrongly.

The reason for anger, the third factor and probably most significant factor, presents the greatest challenge to evaluate. How does a person tell if he is angry for godly or ungodly reason(s)?

The things that anger God—wickedness, rebellion, injustice—should also anger us. Paul tells us to “abhor what is evil, and cling to what is good” (Rom. 12:9). It seems reasonable to assume that if we abhor something, we will be angered if we see it happening. On the other hand, if we are angry for self-centered reasons, this is the kind of anger we are commanded to put off (Col. 3:8).

We should evaluate our anger in the light of its duration, expression, and reason. If on any of these points we find that our anger does not fit the Biblical description of righteous anger, we should respond with repentance, restitution where necessary, and, most importantly, examination of our thinking to find out where our minds need to be renewed so that our emotions (anger) will be in harmony with God’s word.

Blessings,
Philip

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