

I am a theology teacher over at Jesuit and recently, I was discussing Jesus' character with my freshman theology class and when a student appeared to have a deep revelation: "Wait-Jesus sinned! Remember when he got angry turned over the tables in the temple?!" I ask him in response: is anger a sin? Is protesting something wrong a sin? He paused... and thought about it. He didn't know.

In my sophomore class, we read the passage in Exodus when God is describing his character to Moses: merciful, gracious, faithful, loving kindness, slow to anger. Then I paused and asked them: what do you think, is anger a *good* emotion? Many said "no". I ask them, why? And we all stopped to think about this together. Could anger be *good*?

What these discussions revealed is that anger is one of those tricky emotions. Raise your hand if you can relate! That anger is an emotion that you don't really know what to do with, especially as Christians. Maybe we were either taught to suppress it, I mean good Christians forgive, right? especially good Christians girls we shouldn't get angry. Or we think of anger as inconvenient...maybe wanting to avoid the dreadful retort, "geesh- just calm down". Or maybe we somehow picked up from others that we must use anger if we are to ever get what we want. Anger therefore is our only tool.

Yes, anger is confusing. Especially when we think of it in our lives of faith. Maybe we are wondering like my student: is anger a sin? But, God gets angry. Jesus gets angry. What about us? If we are supposed to act like Jesus, how do I express anger?

And what on earth is Jesus getting at when he says: "whoever is angry with your brother is liable to judgment". Doesn't this mean, *don't be angry with your brother?*

I am not too sure that this is what Jesus means. Even research shows that anger is actually a *helpful* emotion. One of the earliest psychological studies done on anger was by a man named James Averill back in the seventies. After all this research, he concluded that, "anger is one of the densest forms of communication. It conveys more

information more quickly, than almost any other type of emotion. And it does an *excellent job* of forcing us to listen to and confront problems we might otherwise avoid.” Amazing! Anger makes us confront problems that we would otherwise avoid.

And the usefulness of anger isn’t just a modern discovery. St. Thomas Aquinas in the middle ages said: “**virtue** consists in being angry at the right person for the right reason for the right amount of time.” So healthy anger is a part of virtuous living.

And when we think of the evil and cruelty in our world, then of course anger is an appropriate response to injustice. Anger is actually a gift. It helps us locate our wounds. It helps us correct what needs correcting. And anger at abuse, at injustice is nothing other than an expression of our own integrity, our dignity as human beings.

So what is Jesus getting at in that verse then? “Whoever is angry with their brother is liable to judgment.” Notice Jesus never says: **don’t be angry**. He says, **when** you are angry at your brother you are liable to judgment. In other words, you are *responsible* for how you use that anger. You are responsible to give an account for how you express it. Express it wisely.

Because, here is also an alarming thing about anger: our brains look the same when expressing anger as they do when they are experiencing happiness. In other words: anger can feel *wonderful*. And if we stop and think about that, this can become very dangerous. Because when our anger builds, when we hold onto it, when it is not used to right an injustice, not towards mending a relationship, it can lead us away from fixing what is broken and move us towards wanting to hurt those we believe wronged us.

Thus, Jesus’ teaching is calling us to a high level of responsibility with *how* we use our anger and where we allow it to lead us. And he wants us to take the potential consequences of this human emotion so seriously that he connects anger with the command “thou shall not kill”.

Seems like a big jump, what is interesting is the first time anger is explored in the bible is in connected to murder. It is the story of the two brothers: Cain and Abel. After Abel's offering is accepted by God and Cain's is not, Cain becomes **angry**. God does not say to Cain "you are sinning!" No, when God sees Cain he asks him to **reflect**: "why are you angry?" Wanting Cain to realize where his anger can lead, he then says: "Cain, sin is crouching at your door, it wants to devour you but you can rule over it." When we feel the anger rise in us, it is an invitation to notice. To reflect. To choose a specific path. Which path will we take?

The tragic story of Cain was that he did not wrestle with his anger. He does not honor it or use it for mending broken relationships. He let it devour him. Which leads him to a field with his brother to act out his anger as revenge, rage and *murder*.

When Jesus explores the command "Thou shall not kill" he wants us to reflect at what is at the root of this action? What is at the root of violence? How does it all start? And if we dig down deep enough, low and behold that tricky emotion anger will be found.

This does not mean however don't feel it. We will feel it. It is human, it can be a gift. So the question is how do we transform our anger? And Jesus urges us to see a bigger picture with our anger: make reconciliation your goal.

Notice later in this passage we heard, Jesus says when you are giving an offering and notice there is unspoken business between you and your sister/brother, go and *reconcile* with that person, then come back to give the offering. And in this act of reconciling, anger very well might be part of the equation. For anger might have been the emotion to signal that someone was hurt, it might be the emotion to signal that someone needs to take ownership of the wrongdoing caused in order for true forgiveness to be offered. Only then can we stand in clear conscience our misdeeds.

Allow me to end with an image. Anger is a guest that will enter our house. Maybe anger has been hanging out in your house for sometime but you have neglected that it was there. You didn't know how to engage it. Or maybe you have over engaged this guest, and have had the same dinner conversation over and over and over every night. Or maybe you barred your door and won't let this guest in.

Wherever you find yourself: don't freak out. Notice anger. Reflect on it.

Ask questions like: how will this guest help me see my wounds? How will this guest teach me about injustice occurring that I need to be mobilized to act on? Ask, how will this guest help me in Christ's mission to reconcile all things?

Whatever you do, don't allow this guest to stay forever, or else it will take over your home.

Remember you have a permanent residence in your house: Jesus your brother will be with you. He is well acquainted with the emotion of anger. He will teach us how to honor the guest, allow it to transform you and will teach you how to gracefully let it go.