



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

January 1987

## ANGER

It is fashionable these days to think that anger is not sinful. This school of thought teaches that it was a mistake to include it among the Seven Deadly Sins for the last 1500 years, and that when our Lord told us, "Let not the sun go down on your wrath," He was not saying that anger is itself a sin. The idea is that anger can lead us to sin, but in itself it is neither sinful nor virtuous. This view also has support from the idea that we should be in touch with our feelings. Anger is one of the most powerful of our emotions, and since it seems to be unavoidable, we should simply accept it and not judge it harshly. We should just accept it as part of ourselves, beyond our control.

The fact that the great weight of Christian tradition (the spiritual writers through the ages) as well as the general sense of Scripture teaches that anger is a sin should make us at least a little hesitant to accept this position. Moreover, our own experience confirms the traditional view. We feel guilty after we have been angry. And when we are angry, we find it more or less impossible to pray. That in itself should be a sufficient indication that anger is not a good thing for a Christian.

The element of truth in the new thinking about anger is that we must acknowledge our anger. It does us no good at all to deny that we are angry when we really are. This is terribly common. For we do not like to think of ourselves as angry people. Anger interferes with our self-image. We like to think that we are self-controlled. And further, we often get angry at things that are really of no importance: then we are ashamed to admit to ourselves that we could get angry over such trivial matters.

So when we get angry, we are tempted to deny it altogether. This is part of the very character of anger. We also know that so long as we refuse to admit that we are angry, we will go on being angry. We have all encountered people who were angry at us for one reason or another but would not admit it. It was

then impossible for us to get past the anger, since the other would not admit that it was there. Apology was to no avail and forgiveness was impossible. Sometimes, of course, the other person just wanted to be angry for a while, and denial was a convenient mechanism for preserving the anger. But sometimes, he just didn't want to admit that he was capable of such anger. On occasion, this situation can spell the demise of a relationship. If anger can do this to a human relationship, imagine what it can do to our relationship with God.

The first step, then, in dealing with anger is to admit that we are angry. We must be honest with ourselves. Even if we don't think we should be angry, we need to acknowledge that we are. For some people, this is the hardest part. They are so used to denying anger when it arises that they cannot recognize it when it occurs. Such folks will need to train themselves to recognize anger: the way it feels to be angry. Others know what it is but choose to ignore it. They develop habits which allow them to refuse to see it.

Once we admit that we are angry we need to look for the cause: what are we mad about? That's not usually too hard: the newspaper didn't get delivered, a friend stood me up, the government is going to raise my taxes again and do something stupid with the money, my wife absolutely will not listen to me. Whatever it is, we need to identify the cause. Sometimes the cause is trivial, but even then we need to know what it is.

The cause will fall into one of two categories. Either it is something we can do something about, or it is something beyond our control. If it is the first, then we need to decide what we should do about it. This is not a question of venting our wrath upon its cause. We are not trying to figure out how we can get back at the offender. Rather it is a question of a constructive remedy. We could call the newspaper delivery office and ask them to remedy the problem, for example. When another person causes the anger, the situation is more difficult. We lack control over others' actions: they are as free as we are. But even if I cannot make my wife change her habits, I can let her know which ones make me angry. Then she know that it creates a problem for me if not for her. For people whose relationships we value, this may be required by the value we place on the relationship and by the love which we have for the other person.

Sometimes, however, the situation which causes our anger is out of our hands. Having missed the nail and hammered our thumb instead, there is not much to be done by way of constructive remedy. Then we must admit that we are angry and that there is nothing we can do about the cause: it is there, and we are powerless to change the situation. Then we can deal with the anger.

Either way, we need recourse to prayer at this point (if we have not already done so). In the first case, we need to ask God's guidance as to what we should do. When we are angry our judgment is of-

ten impaired. It is hard for us to be sure that we are acting in the other's interest and not just our own. It is hard for us to be sure that what we propose to do is really a remedy for the problem and not just a self-indulgent expression of the anger we feel. We need to lay the whole situation before God, and ask His help in knowing what to do. This involves our commitment to do what He tells us. We need to submit ourselves to Him, preferring obedience to the indulgence of our anger.

Then we will need to let go of the anger. This is not always easy. Sometimes we enjoy being angry, venting our self-righteousness for example. We may find a certain satisfaction in justifying ourselves. After all, we feel we have cause to be angry. So long as the cause exists, we will feel justified in our anger, and will want to hold on to it. Then, again, we may well want to share our injury with someone else, for their sympathy and for their help in justifying our anger. We want to tell them how grievously we have been injured, so that they will agree that we should be angry. In short, we want to go on being angry; we do not want to get over it.

If we are to deal with our anger as Christians, we must not tolerate such activity. We must not allow ourselves to nurse our anger. Nursing anger has several bad consequences. First, it takes a great deal of energy. We cannot do anything else with much attention or competence while we are angry. Anger will make us tired, but will not allow us restful sleep: we cannot relax enough to sleep well and still maintain our anger. Second, holding onto it precludes our giving ourselves over to God, which is necessary if we are to pray. Keeping the anger is preferring the anger to everything else -- including God. It is saying that I want to be angry whatever the cost. It is saying to God (at best): "I'll do what you want, so long as you don't ask me to give up my anger." In other words, we put conditions on our devotion to God. And that (we all know from having tried it) is doomed to failure. The only true devotion to God (and the only one that is good for us) is unconditional.

If you have ever tried to pray while angry, you know that it is impossible to turn your attention to God and remain angry at the same time. That is why most Christians avoid prayer when they are angry. Some excuse will present itself and we can go on being angry a little longer. Anger and prayer are incompatible because they draw on the same energy: will we focus ourselves on God or on the cause of anger? It must be one or the other: man cannot serve two masters.

For this reason, we must strictly maintain our daily times of prayer, especially when we are angry. Prayer gives us the opportunity to deal with anger and get over it. It forces the issue. Then (by God's grace) we will have to face the anger, and give it up.

Giving up the anger is the hard part. We need God's help in order to do it. Often it requires that we forgive another person for

what they have done to us. That is hard, even when they have come to us penitently asking to be forgiven. More often, we do not even know if the other recognizes what he has done. It is a hard truth, but Jesus is very clear that the initiative to forgive lies with the person sinned against, whatever the sinner does. So when we are angry, we must forgive, accepting the hurt, and allowing God to give us the strength to bear it without anger, to go on in love in spite of the injury.

Letting go of the anger can thus be costly. It may require swallowing our pride. If we are angry about some injustice done to us, we may want to show the world our anger, so that everyone knows that we have been offended. As Christians we must be ready to tell ourselves that what the world believes is not the most important thing, but what is between us and God. Then we will try to settle our needs with God in prayer. He will no doubt convince us that our pride need not be gratified with an abiding anger. He will show us another way of dealing with the injury, one without anger.

He gives us the example of His Son, our Saviour. In Scripture we see that Jesus manages to resolve His conflicts without recourse to anger. Since He is so completely willing to forgive, He does not take offense as we do, and so does not get angry. He is passionate at times, certainly, but His passion never cuts Him off from the Father. It is never self-indulgent. We must take His example to heart, holding the Cross before our eyes as our goal. If anger is a particular problem for us, we must daily address the ideal, begging God to help us toward it, for without His help its realization is impossible. At the same time, we must anticipate the situations which are most tempting for us, and ask help beforehand. And when we do fall into anger, we must flee to God for healing as soon as we are able to do so.

Even though Jesus does not show us selfish anger, yet He is not any the less human for it. In fact, we see in Jesus a passionate commitment to the ideals of human life: a love for others and for righteousness which we admire in people. He is not without passion for being without anger. He is able to throw out the moneychangers. Letting go of anger does not result in becoming effeminate. Rather it means that the passion behind anger can be turned to other ends. The passion then becomes zeal for holiness. Being part of our nature, passion has its proper place in our sanctification. This place is not in self-indulgent anger, but in the desire for God above all else, that everything we do may be an expression of the love which we have for Him.

To live without anger is an attainable goal. It requires God's grace (and without His help we will not get very far), and it requires our commitment to putting the service of God before all else. We must remember that there is no anger in all the world so important that we would prefer it to the love of God.