

Danger—Anger

Getting [habitually] angry is like taking a small dose of some slow-acting poison—arsenic, for example—every day of your life.

Dr. Redford Williams and
Dr. Virginia Williams,
Anger Kills

DANGER: ANGER OVERLOAD. Too bad our emotional dashboards aren't wired to flash this alarm. Instead, we may suffer other anger overload signs—migraines, neck spasms, ulcers, among others.

Feeling angry is as normal as feeling hungry or feeling tired. But anger overload happens when we make a habit of responding to even minor irritations with an anger response. This ingrained anger habit is called hostility.

Anger places every cell in your entire body on red alert. Your stomach churns out acid. Your skin hairs stand upright. Your adrenal glands pour out adrenaline and steroids. Your pupils dilate. Your blood pressure shoots up. Your pulse races. You are ready to run or gun.

What a great response—if someone has just broken into your house! But

Jesus gave a simple answer. It's a spiritual problem.

One day, a Samaritan town put up a "no vacancy" sign for Jesus and his disciples. They had a policy, "No Jews allowed"; and they were going to enforce it.

James and John blew up. What right did those racist bigots have to refuse the Messiah a hotel room? They wanted to nuke the town with a lightning bolt from heaven. Jesus rebuked them, "You don't realize what *spirit* has taken control of you" (Luke 9:55).

Peter also struggled with his vengeful spirit. At the arrest of Jesus, Peter rushed to cut off his enemy's head. Fortunately he missed; but he wasn't the last vengeful church leader to try to behead an opponent.

"No more of this," Jesus rebuked Peter. "Put your sword away. Don't you realize that anyone who lives by the sword will die by the sword?" (Luke 22:51; Matt. 26:52).

Who is in control of your life—a spirit of revenge or the Holy Spirit?

Give someone
a piece of your mind,
and you give away
your peace of mind.

Soul Slavery

A few years ago, I (SIM) treated a college student—we'll call him Pierre—who suffered constant stomach pains. I saw him many times and ordered many tests, but every one came back normal. The newest medicines gave him only partial relief. A specialist found no specific problem.

After observing his tense personality for several months, I suggested that emotional stress might lie at the root of his problem. He scoffed at the idea.

Pierre was a puzzle until another student told me of a tirade he had heard Pierre deliver. For over an hour, Pierre had stood

rigid, excoriating his enemies for swindling his grandfather decades ago. Sweat poured down his red face, but he didn't stop once to wipe his forehead. When he was done, his voice was hoarse and his shirt soaked.

At his next appointment, I asked Pierre about this incident. I used pictures to show him how emotional stress could overstimulate stomach acid secretion. He wasn't interested. All he wanted to know was the name of the "jerk" who had told me the story.

His abdominal pain became so severe that he failed the next semester and left college. He had given up both his health and education. Still, he clung to his acid resentments, as if they were a priceless heirloom. Pierre never realized that the person his hatred harmed the most was himself.

This principle applies even to physical altercations. We have treated scores of young men for fist fight injuries—rarely for broken jaws, but often for broken knuckles. Doctors even call a specific hand fracture the "boxer's fracture." The person throwing the punch is the most likely person to get hurt.

The moment I begin to hate a man, I become his slave. He controls my thoughts. He controls my feelings. He even controls my dreams. Stress hormones constantly surge through my bloodstream and wear down my body. My work becomes drudgery. I tire easily. My windowed office seems like a cell in Alcatraz. Even while sailing the Chesapeake Bay, resentment ruins my relaxation. The spinnaker may be billowing in the breeze, but I might as well be a seasick galley slave.

The one I hate hounds me wherever I go. I can't escape his mental tyranny. The waiter at the seaside restaurant may be serving up a blackened swordfish or a chocolate mousse, but I feel like a dungeon prisoner eating stale bread and musty water. My teeth chew the food, but the one I hate has stolen my pleasure. King Solomon must have had a similar experience, for he wrote: "Better a simple salad with love, than a sumptuous feast with hostility" (Prov. 15:17).

The man I hate may be soundly snoring many miles from my bedroom; but more cruel than any slave driver, he whips my thoughts into a frenzy. My Perfect Sleeper mattress becomes a rack of torture. I am, indeed, a slave to everyone I hate.

I will not let any man reduce my soul
to the level of hatred.

Booker T. Washington

Transformation

Despite three years with Jesus, the disciples had remained furious fishermen. Jesus even nicknamed the short-fused James and John the “Sons of Thunder.” But then they experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit transformed these angry anglers into the greatest teachers of the greatest love of the greatest man who ever lived.

Peter and James died as martyrs without a trace of bitterness. John, the same man who once wished his enemies barbecued by lightning, later wrote: “Anyone who does not LOVE is really dead. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you are fully aware that a saved murderer is a contradiction in terms” (1 John 3:14–15).

The seventh chapter of Acts records how Stephen “being full of the Holy Spirit” reacted, while being murdered in a hailstorm of rocks. Bones broken and flesh shredded, Stephen showed no spirit of revenge. Just before sinking into a coma, he gasped the same words Jesus used on the cross, “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). How many of us would use our last breath to pray for the spiritual welfare of our own murderers?

We might answer that question by taking a little personal inventory. Yesterday, how did I respond when someone irritated me? At my work, did I throw back the stones or insults? In my car, did I call down fire or curses on other drivers? In conversations, did I cut off heads or reputations? Or was the Holy Spirit of forgiveness in control? Did I try to understand their feelings? Was I gentle with their souls? That was the example of Jesus.

Among our patients, we have seen scores of angry men and women transformed by the power of the Spirit. Dr. Redford Williams, director of behavioral research at Duke University, has also seen these transformed people:

sip and spiteful talk. . . . Instead . . . form new habits: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Be patient with the faults of others, and forgive whoever wrongs you, just as the Lord forgave you.

In summary, make a habit of LOVE.

Colossians 3:5, 7–10, 12–14

As with Paul, the Spirit's transformation is not some magical, once-for-a-lifetime event. It is a daily struggle. As Paul said, it is a matter of unlearning the old habits of hostility and learning to "make a habit of LOVE."

Every day Paul had to crucify his "right" to get even. Every day he had to allow Christ to drive nails into every vengeful bone in his body. The secret to life is not killing yourself by hating your enemies, but killing your self-centeredness by loving your enemies.

"None of these [revenge-produced] diseases"—this can be God's gift to you.