

Extreme MAKEOVER

Character Edition

How can others experience how Jesus has changed our lives? How can others see visible evidence that we are living in the kingdom of heaven now? The short answer revolves around the way we live our lives. Mohandas Gandhi said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." At the core of this statement is the issue of character and the way we treat others.

It is always a good idea to revisit the Sermon on the Mount because much of it dealt with character. Jesus drives home the point that there is a difference between a person's behavior and their character. Behavior is external, we can fake it, character is intrinsic, and we live there. What we need is an Extreme Makeover, character edition, so people can see how Jesus has changed our lives.

The first character trait Jesus addresses is anger. I had a friend who used to get mad at everybody but kept it inside. One day, his philologist gave him a recommendation. Tell people when you are starting to get angry. So one day, I am having a conversation with him and he stops me in mid-sentence and says, "I think that makes me angry." Pretty soon my friends and I heard him tell other folks quite frequently, "I think that makes me angry." Before long, that was the new running joke we all said to each other, "I think that makes me angry." Now my friend became good at recognizing once anger was beginning to fester, but the challenge for him was to figure out a way to minimize it, to work through it.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus does not think much of our anger, in fact, he essentially equivocates it with murder.

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Here is the first point:

1. Anger is liable to Judgment

Ouch! That is harsh. Now Jesus does not directly state that murder and anger are on equal footing. The point here is that like murder, anger is liable to judgment. In other words, do not think because you do not murder that it is okay for you to walk around being angry at people all the time. It is also worth mentioning that the term for brother is used in this context that deals with fellow member of a religious Jewish community, which for us would be other Christ followers. Now this does not give us license to be angry with people who are not Christians, but it does highlight the reality that anger should not be something we harbor against those in our Christian community.

I know a lot of Christians who are angry at other Christ followers, even within their biological family. I know one gal whose grandma won't even acknowledge her or her mother. Every holiday season her dad receives a Christmas or Easter card, and there is never any mention of his wife or daughter. It is as if they no longer exist. Something happened in the past, which they have stopped trying to work through anymore. Both sides are Christians.

Now the problem with anger is when it festers. When this happens, it can easily lead to sin or even worse, hatred. C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, that anger is essentially “hurt that bleeds.” Jesus wants us to stop the bleeding.

There are some people that seem to get angry very quickly. It is quite possible you are angry with me know. Most of these folks are men—though I have encountered several angry women in recent years. What I have discovered with men is that they many do not know how to process hurt. They do not know how to identify hurt, so they get angry very quickly.

The problem of course is when anger turns into sin. This is what Jesus is getting at in this first section. He says angry people are liable to judgment when their anger turns into scorn and contempt against the other person. The sin Jesus identifies is name calling. When people are angry they insult others by calling them *Raca* or a fool. *Raca* can be translated as “empty-headed” or the endearing word of choice people tend to use, “idiot.” When you use your anger to injure people verbally or worse, physically, you are liable for judgment, even as Jesus mentions, to the hell of fire.

Okay, here is the second thing Jesus mentions about anger.

2. Reconciliation is more Important than Religious Duty

23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Here, a worshipper of God, a churchgoer’s anger, has caused another person to have something against him or her. It is more important to Jesus to be reconciled than to sacrifice to God. Someone once said, that if the church heeded this rule, the church would be a lot emptier on Sunday mornings. The fact is, many people are bitter against us because of our anger issues. The worst thing you can do is to ignore that reality and continue to offer sacrifices to God on Sunday morning.

Now there are many Christians who have recognized their sin of anger and have tried to be reconciled, but the other person continues to be unreceptive. If your efforts were sincere, this is between you and God, Jesus can live with this. Just make sure you have sincerely tried to work through the issues.

Also keep the matter in prayer and don’t lose that conviction that you do want to work it out. The third point is similar to the previous one, the chief difference being in expediency.

3. Make it a point to settle anger outbursts quickly

25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. 26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

There is a verse in the book of Ephesians that says essentially, “Do not let the Sun go down in your anger. This is what Jesus is essentially saying here. During the times of Jesus, when you took someone to court you actually met them along the way to see if you could work out a deal before you reached the court house. As you could imagine, you only had a window of time. If you could not, chances are your anger would force the judge to call the guards and throw you in prison. Jesus uses this both literally and as a metaphor for standing judgment before God. Remember, Jesus said, angry people who sin are liable for judgment and the hell of fire.

Objection: What about Righteous Anger?

Now you may be thinking, not all anger is bad; the Bible also speaks about a righteous anger. Yes, this is absolutely true and there are several examples throughout Scripture.

- a. God is angered by the mistreatment of helpless strangers, widows, orphans (Ex 22:21-24).
- b. God is angered by men worshiping idols (Exodus 32:10; Deuteronomy 6:14-15; Ezra 8:22).
- c. God is angered by the grumbling and complaining of His people (Numbers 11:1, 10),

Jesus also displayed righteous anger.

- a. He was angered by the money changers making a profit in the temple courts
- b. He was angry at the Pharisees when he pronounced his seven woes against them
- c. He was even angry with Peter when the disciple discouraged his death: Get Behind thee Satan

The Bible even mentions that there are certain things we should be angry about (Be angry, but do not sin), which essentially revolves around the things that we see others abuse, but are commanded by God. In our culture, if we are not angry when a child becomes molested, a person is murdered, or there is racial profiling, or a husband has an affair on his wife, or if someone's sin is destroying another's life, then something is wrong with us. The point of growing in Christ is to hate sin and be grieved at the things that grieve him. This is what the Bible means by righteous anger. We become angry because the things that are important to God have been trampled upon by men.

But even in these scenarios, there still is the warning that in our righteous anger, we do not sin. One classic example is when Christians were angry over the philosophy of abortion clinics (righteous anger) but took it a step to far (okay way to far) and sinned by bombing abortion clinics. Even righteous anger must maintain its boundaries. In a nutshell,

1. Righteous anger is just because others have violated God's law.
2. Righteous anger is not explosive and does not allow the sun to set.
3. Righteous anger is always in control
4. Righteous anger does not delight in seeing other people, guilty or not, suffer.

So yes, there is righteous anger, but I would venture to say the anger we display for others does not for the most part fall into this category. Many times, anger is not righteous, it is self-righteous. Self righteous anger gets bent out of shape when people disrespect us, discount us, ignore us, disagree with us, offend us, question our character or insult us. We are very fragile people and often it does not take a lot to get us bent out of shape. This is the kind of anger than can make us liable to God when we move into the realm of expressing our dissatisfaction verbally or worse, physically.

Now, that does not mean we won't struggle with anger. Everyone of us has our limit before we blow it. The important thing is to recognize what triggers the anger and what adjustments will you make in the future. Jesus doesn't talk about anger so that we will feel defeated; he talks about it so that we can deal with our anger and learn to become less agitated. So, pinpoint the things that cause you the most anger, bring them before God, and ask Him to help you do better the next time the same scenario presents itself, which I guarantee it will. You might fail a thousand times, but what God is looking for is that you will continue to try to grow and become more conformed in the image of Christ.

Lastly, and I think most importantly, it is important that we think through why Christ insists on the Extreme Character Makeover. The most obvious explanation is that God is love and that Christ based his entire ministry on the premise of love. In reality, Christ had every reason to be angry with us because we never thought it was worth our time to pursue a relationship with God the Father. There was a time we did not want to have anything to do with him. Nevertheless, Christ did not store up resentment and seek to judge us, he came to earth for just the opposite reason, to save us. Romans 5:7-8 says that "*For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*"

Love then, is an expectation for followers of Jesus. To have hatred or anger stored up in our hearts goes against the very character of God. We are called to love God and people.

Jesus even demonstrated this on the cross when bloodied and beaten and heard the jeers of his enemies shout angrily in unison, "Crucify him." His response is beyond our imagination, "Forgive them Father, they do not know what they are doing." Consequently, getting a handle on our anger is paramount if we intend to represent Jesus as a Christ follower. He was different than others, and likewise, we should be to represent him accurately.

I also do not think you understand the magnitude of forgiveness that has been bestowed on you by the love of Christ. He took on your sins, he was punished by your sins in death on the cross, and he justified your sins when he was raised from the dead. My goodness, we spend so much time justifying our anger, that in the process, we minimize the incredible forgiveness we have received in the Lord. Let's focus on Jesus when we are angry and pray that our character becomes more like him.