

Let's Talk about How We Talk about Anger



by EDWARD T. WELCH

“Let’s talk about anger.”

What comes to mind when you hear this? Most of you would quickly move among three categories: your own anger, how you have been hurt by someone else’s anger, and what Scripture says about anger.

Here is a slightly different invitation. “Let’s talk about *how* we talk about anger.”

This takes a moment. You have to think in a different way.

- How *do* you talk about anger?
- What tone carries the day? Are you patient with an angry person? Do you get angry with an angry person?
- Why do you use one Scripture passage instead of another?
- Do you tend to ask more questions of an angry person or do more teaching?
- Do you speak about your own story with an angry person? If so, how much?

Considering questions like these is called meta-thinking. It is thinking about thinking. It assumes complexity and layers of analysis. It assumes you have reasons for what you say and how you say it.

An example of these layers is present when Jesus spoke in parables.

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His disciples asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” (Matt 13:10). This is different than, “What do the parables mean?” The disciples did want to understand what Jesus was saying, but they also wanted to understand *why* he said things as he did. What was the thinking behind his use of parables? The disciples wanted to hear about his teaching *method*.

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Similarly, in counseling, we distinguish between content, which is *what* we say, and method, which is *how* we say it. The basic idea is that there are reasons for how we say it—important reasons—that are not always stated. In this article, I want to turn a light on the reasons. To do that, I will consider some meta-questions on a book I have written about the problem of anger. I will talk about how I talked about anger. Why did I write it the way that I did? What was my biblical rationale? The book consists of fifty short devotionals and is titled *A Small Book about a Big Problem: Meditations on Anger, Patience, and Peace*.¹ My goal here is not to promote the book, but that you consider how there are reasons for biblical counseling's methods that are barely out of sight. Our theology controls both what we say in counseling and how we say it.

Here are eight meta-principles that guide the book's method.

1. *Start with the person.* God speaks to people in particular situations. His people are living through something, they are feeling something, they have done something. Then he speaks. In an analogous way, I want to first enter a person's particular experience and life circumstances. I am starting with the person rather than a particular biblical passage, because I think this is the way of biblical wisdom and love. I expect that no one is excited to talk about his or her anger. So I wade in slowly.

Here is an example from the book.

Anger, of course, is in us all. To be human is to get angry.

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Look closely at any day and we can usually find anger in either actions or attitudes. Just track those pesky inconveniences—things spilled, things misplaced, traffic problems that seem devoted to making your life more difficult, and people, so many people, who are ill-mannered and unhelpful.

After a little fuming, cursing, or accusing, most of these nuisances pass and we get on with what's next. Some are more worthy adversaries and disrupt the rest of the day or the rest of our life. Either way, anger is so common, almost ordinary. (Day 1)

I am trying to take the reader one small step. I know the topic is a sensitive one. In a moment, an angry person can turn from seeing his or her own anger to being angry. I am trying to say that there is no reason to feel singled out. Anger is in us all, so talking about it is a good and normal thing for us to do.

I also want to do this without minimizing it. Anger may be ordinary, but it's still a problem. The Day 1 devotional continues:

To be angry is to destroy. Yet ordinary does not mean innocent. In its commonness we can overlook our anger's volatile and destructive disposition. Everyone has both been destroyed by someone's anger and done some destroying. We are sitting on a bomb and, when it goes off, bad things happen.

A father yelled at his ten-year-old son when his son tried to help with some work around the house.

"Get out! You are messing everything up!"

When the father looked up at his son, he could tell that his son had lost something—security, a young child's enjoyment of his father, a piece of his soul—and the relationship would not be the same for a long time. There can be reconciliation, but anger leaves its mark. (Day 1)

Yes, anger is a serious problem, but I try to hold on to the readers. I don't want them to walk away, so I am carefully touching on anger's destructive ways. Angry people are more aware of their hurt than the wrongness of their anger, and I am letting them know that we will get to that hurt. With the

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