

Dear Friend,

“You make me so mad!!” How many times have you or a member of your family made this exclamation or something similar to it? The question I want to ask is this, “Is that a true statement?” In other words, is the anger I feel caused by what someone else has done to me? The biblical answer to that question is no, no one and nothing makes me feel the way I feel at any time. The reason I feel as I do is to be found within me, not outside of me. Let me use anger to show what is true of all emotion. In Matthew 5: 21-22a Jesus says this, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I say to you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.” 1 John 3: 14-15 says, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”

In both of these passages an emotion, “anger/hatred”, is said to be equivalent to murder. In both passages we are told that those who are angry with another human being, (specifically, another Christian) will be treated by God as murderers deserve, with eternal punishment. Therefore, the emotion of anger is not something that is created in us by someone or something else, but something we choose to have, as God holds us accountable for our emotions. This is true even if it “feels” like you didn’t choose to be angry, it simply “happened.”

So what is the biblical explanation as to where my anger comes from? Jesus says in Matthew 12:33-34, “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good, for out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” This is the biblical explanation for where all evil emotions, thoughts, words and actions come from. These “fruits” are born in our lives because of the evil that is in our hearts. In fact, it is not only evil fruit that comes from our hearts, but good fruit as well, which is what Jesus says in the v. 35.

Several years ago I read an illustration that has helped me as I have sought to understand the relationship between what happens to me and how I feel about what happens to me. It’s a simple illustration based upon the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 12:33-35. If you squeeze a tube of toothpaste and black ink comes out of it, why does black ink come out instead of toothpaste? Does the squeezing cause the black ink or does it reveal the black ink? Obviously, the squeezing does not produce the black ink, it simply reveals what was in the tube all along. As long as the tube is not squeezed you would assume that it is full of toothpaste, but the minute the tube is squeezed you discover what is in it. It is the same in our lives.

Our emotions are like the warning lights on the dashboard of our car. They reveal to us what it is that our hearts love, hope for and trust in. Anger, anxiety, fear, joy, love, passion are all indicator lights that show us what we are trusting in to give us life. Our emotions are given to us by God to help us in our fight against sin. We are not to blame others for the way we feel, justify the way we feel, nor are we to ignore how we feel. We are to ask God to help us be honest about what is going on in our hearts as revealed by the emotions we have. We are then to repent of the false things that our hearts love and trust and seek to have “pure” hearts that love and trust Christ alone.

There are many questions that the biblical teaching on the relationship between our emotions and our hearts produces. I think it is important to answer one of the most common ones. Jesus said in Matthew 5:22 that anger is murder. Mark 3:5 says, “He (Jesus) looked around at them *in anger* and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and it was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” If anger is murder, then was Jesus guilty of murder when he was angry with the Pharisees? The answer to that question is no, because we are told on a number of other occasions that Jesus never sinned (Heb. 4:15). So, if Jesus, who is a man as well as God, was able to be angry without sinning, then that must mean it is possible for humans to be angry without sinning.

That is true. It is possible to be angry as a human being and not to sin. A close examination of Jesus’ anger shows that “righteous anger” is a response to God’s glory being spurned and other humans being harmed. It is right to feel anger when we hear about a child being sexually molested or when we observe racist attitudes in others. But even this anger is a dangerous thing in the hearts of sinful humans as it so quickly becomes self-righteous and vindictive. So that is why Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, “In your anger do not sin, do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” We are to aim at living angry free lives by having hearts that are pure, i.e., full of love for God and others. However, when we encounter evil being done to others or humans despising God, then anger is an appropriate response but must not be held onto as it is so easily becomes sinful.

Understanding the cause of my emotions has been one of the most important and freeing discoveries of my entire life. I want to encourage you to pay attention to what your emotional life is showing you about what your heart is fixed upon. God has given us a wonderful gift in our emotions to help us learn to love and trust him rather than other people, money, health, respect, achievement, clean houses, obedient children, etc. May he graciously help us to respond to what our emotions show us so that we might live in the joy and love of the Lord.

Seeking a pure heart with you,