

My family recently attended a funeral visitation for a member of my wife's extended family. It was an opportunity to mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15) and to catch up with some we've not seen in years.

No doubt you've seen that for the occasions when you can't make it to visitation or the funeral, there is now the option of writing a tribute in on online funeral guestbook. Legacy.com provides such online services across the U.S. They process more than 18,000 notes posted online each day.

But here's what they're finding: Not every online tribute to the one who died is glowing. In fact, Legacy staff are kept quite busy intercepting messages that are aimed at cutting down the dead rather than honoring them. Legacy calls it "dissing the dead." They currently have 45 employees, and 30 percent of their annual budget, assigned to intercepting messages that angrily "diss the dead."

Ian Urbina, "Sites Invite Online Mourning, but Don't Speak Ill of the Dead," The New York Times (11-5-06)

Anger is part of being made in God's image. But how we handle it is usually unhealthy. Counterproductive. Destructive. This morning we come to a better way.

This is week five in a series titled, "I have a question for you." We are dealing not with questions we have for God, but rather several crucial questions God asks of us. The question this week confronts how we typically limit love and patience to those who treat us well. And we imagine that's just fine.

But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes on a whole series of issues people commonly deal with. He starts where we are. But then he raises the bar to God's expectation for how we are to deal with one another. In today's question, from Matthew 5:46, Jesus asks, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?"

It is a confrontational question to be sure. A call to go way beyond the norm. "You're expecting a medal for being kind to people who are kind to you? That's it? You think that's good enough?"

Jesus goes on to point out that even the most corrupt people do that much. Mafiosos are kind to their own kind. "If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that?"

Pray with me, please.

For all the ways we get ticked off, Lord, we ask your help.

Open our understanding.

Get under our skin.

Break through our defenses.

Change things.

Change the world, we ask.

Start with us.

Amen.

Before we get into what it will take to truly follow Christ in the midst of conflict, when your blood is starting to boil, let's touch base on...

Why we get stuck in anger

How is it that otherwise well put-together, smart people end up throwing adult temper tantrums?

I know a couple who in the midst of verbally attacking each other, the wife got so mad she hurled a dinner plate at her husband. It missed him but hit the wall so hard it broke through the drywall and stuck in the wall. He in turn got so mad he put his fist through the back of the bedroom door.

They ended up leaving those holes unrepaired, to remember the damage they could do in their anger. They live in a beautiful home. They're highly successful business people. And...they almost blew up their marriage with unchecked anger.

Where does this kind of rage come from? At least three common causes.

- **Unrealistic expectations**

A young woman who had just gotten engaged happened to tell her gal pals of her fiancé, "I can't wait till we're married, and I start to change him!"

She meant it! No idea that if he knew, he would run for the hills! How do you imagine their first year of marriage went?

Some people don't marry a husband or wife; they put the ring on a fantasy. So when reality steps into the marriage, anger erupts. Unrealistic expectations.

A second common cause for anger is...

- **Emotional immaturity**

We expect two and three year-olds to throw temper tantrums. But emotionally, age is no guarantee of emotional maturity. Depending on your upbringing, you may be an emotional adult, an emotional teenager, or an emotional infant. Emotional maturity takes modeling, intentional training (this is part of a parent's role, to train our kids in how to handle conflict and anger in ways that are good and healthy and godly). It takes modeling, training, and plenty of real-time practice.

Two men were talking when one boasted, "In the ten years we've been married, my wife and I haven't had a single argument!" His friend replied, "Well personally, my marriage hasn't been quite that boring!"

Conflict isn't bad. Disagreement isn't wrong. Anger can fuel much-needed change. It's more a question of how we handle it, direct it, control our temper.

A visitor to the U.S. was told there are many divorces here due to incompatibility. She said with surprise, "I thought incompatibility was one of the purposes of marriage."

Take any two people and put them together, there's going to be incompatibility. You're two different people! That's part of what attracts couples to one another in the first place. The differences carry the potential to make you much stronger together than either of you without the other. Same in the workplace and church and sports team. But making it through demands emotional maturity. It doesn't develop automatically. It takes intentionality.

A third common cause for destructive anger is...

- **The myth of greener grass**

There's the story of a new nurse taken on a tour her first day in a hospital psych ward. They came to the first room, and she sees a woman smacking her hand into her forehead repeatedly. She kept bemoaning, "Larry, how could you do it? Larry, how could you do it?"

The guide explained that the patient was in love with a man named Larry. When Larry broke up with her to marry someone else, she couldn't get over Larry. She was heartbroken.

At the other end of the hall they entered a room and there was a female patient crying, "Larry, Larry, how could this happen? Larry, Larry."

Now the new nurse was really confused, so she asked, "Who is this?"

The guide said, "Oh, she's the woman who married Larry."

The myth of greener grass. Social scientists are looking lately at the impact of social media on marital unhappiness and divorce. Because when you see other people presenting their best up against your norm, it's hard not to feel dissatisfied. And imagine there's greener grass elsewhere.

So there are three common reasons we get stuck in anger: unrealistic expectations, emotional immaturity, and the myth of greener grass.

Let's move on to what it takes to follow Christ in navigating conflict. If the most fundamental definition of what it means to be a Christian is that we trust and follow Christ, what does that mean in times of conflict? This is where many people's Christianity flies out the window. So it may be where many need it most.

Jesus models, and teaches, how to navigate conflict constructively and ways that go far beyond the norm, to his better way. Let's talk about...

Following Christ through conflict

When you're in the midst of conflict, the challenge is to...

1. See deeper—that justice is not enough.

Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

Love your neighbor is the way the world turns. That's the norm. But Christ calls us to be weird. Be abnormal when it comes to how you handle anger.

Let's back up for a moment. The purpose of law, both the Law of Moses given in the OT as well as just laws today, is to restrain evil. That is the basic function of law: restraining evil.

If you drive through a school zone going 85 mph while kids are crossing the street, you're a danger to yourself and others. The law—and signs displaying the law, the speed limit—deter evil. They restrain those who would otherwise go pedal to the metal.

When OT Law was given, it was given not only to restrain evil, but also to restrain revenge. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was meant to limit how far the victim could go in harming the offender. Its purpose, in other words, was justice, as opposed to on one end of the spectrum injustice, or on the other end of the spectrum, revenge and vengeance. Law puts a check on vengeance.

Jesus said elsewhere that he came not to get rid of OT law, but to fulfill it. So he's not saying an eye for an eye is wrong. He's saying it's not enough. It's better than injustice or revenge, but it's not best.

One summer when I was living in NYC we held free car washes. One afternoon a couple pulled in to get their car washed. They stepped out for refreshments while volunteers washed their car.

It turns out they were headed to a divorce attorney appointment. Couldn't stand each other. Had decided to call it quits. A volunteer from the church told them about the love of God found in Jesus, how while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, to reconcile us. On the spot, they prayed, asking Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior. They cancelled the appointment with the divorce attorney!

Justice is good. But it's not enough. It doesn't change the heart. Only radical love can do that. Look deeper: Only praying for the offender can release you from bitterness. Justice is good. But it's not good enough.

Second, Jesus says, when you get caught in conflict...

2. See higher—that injustice won't have the last word.

Right here is the greatest difference for how a Christ-follower ought to view injustice and hurt, the things that provoke anger and rage: injustice will not have the final word. There is an ultimate Judge, who will ultimately judge all sin.

If you turn to the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the opening verses of Matthew chapter 5, you see a whole list of those who suffer now, who will receive reward later. Verse 6, for example. Jesus promises...

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." v. 6

Right now? Consistently in the world the way it is? I think not. He's calling us to see higher—that above this plain is another kingdom, with another King over whoever happens to be in office at the moment. For his first audience, it was hated pagan Roman authorities. The Jews suffered under them, ultimately lost their place of worship because of Roman power.

The hope here is that the powerful now won't always be in power.

The weak now won't forever remain at the end of the line.

If justice passes you by in the present, there is still the promise that God will make it right in the end.

This is the hope that kept American civil rights volunteers moving forward despite terrible suffering: they were doing the right thing, in a peaceful way. And even when the present meant suffering, they believed that in the end, all will be well. So they pressed on.

Julian of Norwich said it this way back in 1373:

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"—meaning, God will ultimately put all things right.

It is too much to bear the burden of wanting to see justice come to everything, everywhere. In the pursuit of justice, don't give in to bitterness or despair. Look higher.

And third, Jesus says when anger grabs a hold of you...

3. See farther—that the undeserved love we receive is what we're to extend.

And here we find the greatest challenge in everything Christ calls us to. We're not to take our cues from society when it comes to how to handle anger. Normal...isn't good enough. Jesus calls us to be weird like he was weird—radically different from the norm in better ways, in ways that demand deep dependence on God.

Look with me at Matthew 5:48. Jesus says...

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Right away we want to explain away what he says. We can't be perfect. Exactly! He's calling us to look way beyond the norm, to the way God treats us. Romans 5:8...

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

That's the standard! If you're a follower of Jesus, that's the benchmark for who to love and how to love. It's not a feeling. It's a choice to direct my feelings toward the only One who can help, to help me love more like he does.

There's the story of the couple who went to a counselor and told him, "We're going to get a divorce, but we want your help in how to tell the kids. We don't want to hurt them. We want to do this right."

The counselor learns they're Christians. That's what's prompted them to get help in doing this well. He realizes he's got one shot. He'll probably never see them again.

So after hearing what they have to say, he turns to the husband and says, "God says you're to love your wife as Jesus Christ loved the church. That means you sacrifice for her. You devote yourself to her. You forgive her. You're to pursue your wife and cherish her." The husband scoffs, "That ship has sailed. Not going there."

The counselor says, "Okay, if you can't start at that level, start at a lower level. Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself. Can you love your wife like a neighbor?" The husband says, "No way! I'm furious at the things she's said to me!"

So the counselor says, "Fine, then. Jesus commands you to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Start there!"

Christ's call to those who know him is to see farther, beyond the deep conflict and anger. Look farther, to the deep, deep love of Jesus that God has extended to you. That's the well from which to draw when bitterness starts shriveling your heart. The undeserved love we receive is what we're to extend.

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?" Matthew 5:46

In the end, it all points back to Jesus. If you truly believe that because of Jesus God is with you and God is for you, then that changes everything. All the wrong you have done, he has forgiven. You didn't initiate that. You don't deserve it. But he forgives you. He loves you.

Revel in that. Soak in it. And from that place of being so blessed, find his strength to forgive those who wrong you.

That doesn't mean you have to overlook evil done to you. He doesn't mean justice should not be pursued. He's saying beyond the pursuit of justice and standing up for yourself, is the greater need for those who have received God's radical forgiveness, to extend it to others. Set them free from trying to get revenge, and set yourself free in the process.

There is love that came for us,
The song celebrates,
Humbled to a sinner's cross.
You broke my shame and sinfulness.
You rose again, victorious!
You are stronger, sin is broken, you have saved me.
Jesus, you are Lord of all!

For all the ways and all the days when anger has ruled us, Lord, we ask your cleansing. Do some holy gardening and dig out each root of bitterness which has taken hold. Cause faith, hope, and love to spring up and bear fruit among your people, we pray, that those who know us will truthfully be able to see and say, "These people have been with Jesus." Amen.