

The Amazing Jesus His Amazing Anger (Righteous Indignation)

Intro: This year we're taking time once a month in a lesson to reflect upon the amazing character of Jesus. There are so many things about him that we need to admire and imitate. We've already talked about his amazing prayer life, his amazing compassion for people in their suffering, his amazing forbearance with his disciple's failings, his amazing patience with God's timing, and last month his amazing relationship with his family.

All these qualities we readily appreciate because they respond in a pleasing way to human need and weakness; but there is another amazing characteristic of Jesus that is often overlooked--his amazing righteous indignation toward sin. For many people, an angry Jesus would not fit into their picture of someone who they believe accepted everyone and tolerated everything, except, of course, the intolerant. So if we want to avoid faith in what someone once called "half a Christ," we need to reflect more thoughtfully on Jesus' amazing and sometimes quite surprising righteous indignation.

There are a surprising number of instances in the Gospels in which it appears Jesus responded with anger to situations facing him. Let's take a look.

The Anger of Jesus

Jesus' anger with the Pharisees

*AND He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there with a withered hand. And they were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, in order that they might accuse Him. And He *said to the man with the withered hand, "Rise and come forward!" And He *said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" But they kept silent. And after looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He *said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. And the Pharisees went out and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (Mark 3:1-6)*

The Pharisees had developed a concept of righteousness that depended upon obedience to the letter of the law while often ignoring the spiritual principles upon which the law was founded.

This enabled them at times to practice some terrible inward attitudes, while claiming to be righteous externally (Cf. Sermon on the Mount).

But another way that their legalism worked against genuine righteousness was to place undue restrictions on God's commands that were not warranted by the principles that produced them. That was especially true with the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was intended from its institution to celebrate the freedom that God had given his people from bondage; and to use the day to honor God in worship and to do good to others. In keeping with the spiritual principle of freedom, Jesus often freed people from dreaded diseases and afflictions on the Sabbath; but the Pharisees considered this a violation of the command not to "work."

How could liberating a person from a manifest birth defect be a violation of the day that celebrates God's liberation of His people from bondage? Yet the Pharisees were playing a game of "gotcha," looking to see if Jesus would heal the man with the withered hand so that they could accuse him of violating the Sabbath by working.

Jesus was justifiably angry with the Pharisees.:

First, though claiming to be righteous, they viewed Jesus with an animus engendered by pride, self-righteousness, and a hatred of him for nothing more than violating their misguided rules. The needs of the suffering man apparently meant nothing to them. He could live in his misery one more day and get healed then. They were not only hardened in heart toward this man; they were hardened in heart toward truth!

They were unwilling to re-examine their thinking; but instead hardened their heart to Jesus' efforts to reason with them about their mistaken conclusions.

Jesus would eventually deliver one of his most blistering sermons against the inconsistent moral deficiency of the Pharisees in Matthew 23; and that text also could be cited as an example of Jesus' anger, since it too rankles with righteous indignation.

Jesus' anger with his disciples

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all. And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands upon them." (Mark 10:13–16)

We are not told what it was about the circumstances that caused the disciples to "rebuke" those bringing their children to Jesus.

Were they zealous for his time and thought this was an unnecessary intrusion?

Did they think Jesus had more important things to do than to "waste" his time receiving one child after another? After all, was not the business of the kingdom for grown-ups?

Notice Jesus' strong emotional response! He was indignant! And his sharp double command—Let (lit., "start allowing") the little children

come to Me, and do not hinder (lit., “stop preventing”) them—was a withering rebuke of the disciples for becoming an obstacle to those that Jesus said had the spirit to truly possess the kingdom.

Jesus was angered by anyone who would get in the way of those who would come to God and be a source of stumbling to them.

Jesus' anger with the money-changers and merchants in the temple courts

There are likely two episodes in which Jesus manifested his anger with the abuse of God's temple--one at the beginning of His ministry (Jn. 2) and one at the end (Mk. 11). We'll look at the latter.

Jesus had made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem as Israel's spiritual king on Sunday of the final week of his life (so-called Palm Sunday).

In the aftermath of his entry, Jesus went into the temple courts and looked around. He apparently was assessing what is going on during these days as pilgrims are streaming into Jerusalem for the upcoming Passover. He left without action and spent the night in Bethany; but when he returned the next day he did what many people would have considered quite out of character.

And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, “Is it not written, ‘MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS’? But you have made it a ROBBERS’ DEN. (Mark 11:15–19)

First a word of explanation: The temple worship offered by the pilgrims would require two essential things:

They would need animals to sacrifice; and since they had come from a distance, it would be a hardship on them to bring their animals with them. And there was always a risk that the priests might not find them acceptable for some reason.

In addition the Jews were obliged to pay a half-shekel temple tax once a year. So they would do this when they made their annual pilgrimage.

So as a "convenience" to the worshipper, the religious authorities allowed merchants to sell sacrificial animals in the outer courts of the temple complex. In addition, money changers set up their tables to exchange the foreign currency for the needed half-shekels. Of course all of this was done for a price.

"It's not difficult to see what angered Jesus. Pilgrims journeyed days to see God, to witness the holy, to worship His Majesty. But before they were taken into the presence of God, they were taken to the cleaners." (Lucado).

Keep in mind that this was not an impulsive show, nor was it an off-the-cuff temper tantrum. It was a deliberate act with an intentional

message. God will never hold guiltless those who exploit the privilege of worship.¹

Jesus' anger at the effects of sin

Jesus had been sent word that his dear friend Lazarus was dying; but by the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead for days. John records Jesus' reaction to Lazarus'

*When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They *said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. And so the Jews were saying, "Behold how He loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have kept this man also from dying?" Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within, *came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it."* (John 11:33–38)

The somewhat unexpected element in John's description of Jesus' reaction is in the verb in verses 33, and 38, translated *deeply moved* in many modern versions. This word (*embrimaomai*), when applied to human emotion invariably speaks of anger! B. B. Warfield comments forcefully: 'What John tells us, in point of fact, is that Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state, not of uncontrollable grief but of inexpressible anger. True, he did also respond with tears (35), but the emotion which tore his breast and clamored for utterance was just rage.'

But why anger? 'The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death, its unnaturalness, its "violent tyranny" (Calvin). In Mary's grief he sees and feels the misery of the whole race and burns with rage against the oppressor of men. It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he had come into the world to destroy. Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but that is incidental—his soul is held by rage, and he advances to the tomb, in Calvin's words, "as a champion who prepares for conflict".' Like the farmer in his parable, Jesus can pronounce this verdict: 'An enemy did this' (Mt. 13:28). That enemy he has come to slay.²

The nature of Jesus' anger

Jesus anger was consonant with the wrath that God has always displayed against sin.

God's wrath is not like the anger that human beings often display. People often vent their rage in vindictive, selfish ways that may dissipate emotion but do little to promote true justice.

¹ Lucado, M. (1992). *And the angels were silent* (61). Portland, OR: Multnomah.

² Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John: Here is your king!: With study guide*. The Bible Speaks Today (164–166). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

By contrast, God's wrath is based in His just and righteous character (Is. 11:5). When He judges people and nations, it is not because He feels hurt, but because wrongs need to be righted. His wrath comes against evil and wickedness.

Jesus' anger was holy, not selfish. His anger was directed at what dishonored God. It was directed at Satan and the effect of His work in the world.

Learning to be like Jesus

We too need to be angry and grieved at hard hearts that will not listen to the truth. We need to be angry when people get in the way of those who are seeking God. We need to be angry when God's purposes for His church are perverted. We need to be angry when we see the fruit of Satan's work in this world!

But we need to be careful lest we confuse godly indignation with outraged patriotism, personal self-righteousness, or a need for personal revenge.

Anyone can become angry. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, and in the right way—that is not easy.³

Perhaps this is Paul's point in Eph. 4:26, "*Be angry, and do not sin.*" By NT standards, anger can be either good or bad, depending on motive and purpose. Godly anger hates injustice, immorality, ungodliness, and every other sin. When such anger is unselfish and based on love for God and others, it not only is permissible; it is commanded!

Righteous indignation is born out of a real abiding conviction of what is true. And if we do not feel anger toward real evil, we have reason to question how convicted we really are!

"A man that does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good. A man that does not know how to be shaken to his heart's core with indignation over things evil is either a fungus or a wicked man" (H. W. Beecher).⁴

We see the manifestations of godliness all around us. Like Jesus we need to be genuinely affected by it; and like Jesus take concrete steps to oppose it.

Conclusion: As we observe Jesus in the gospels we are getting a fuller understanding of what we are called to be. For in the divine purpose Paul writes "*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren;*" (Romans 8:29, NASB)

And we should all make sure we understand that our behavior can make the Lord angry. In fact, the Scriptures are very clear

³ *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching: Over 1500 sermon illustrations arranged by topic and indexed exhaustively.* 1989 (M. P. Green, Ed.) (Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

⁴ *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching: Over 1500 sermon illustrations arranged by topic and indexed exhaustively.* 1989 (M. P. Green, Ed.) (Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

John affirmed that God's wrath now rests on those who fail to believe in Jesus (Jn 3:36). Paul asserted that God presently reveals his anger against those who suppress the truth of the gospel (Rom 1:18; 1 Thess 2:16).

Paul spoke of a coming day of God's anger when his righteous judgment will be revealed against unrepentant sinners (Rom 2:5, 8; cf. 9:22; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10). Left to their own attempts to keep God's law, people will face God's anger (Rom 4:15). Only through justification on the basis of Jesus' atonement can people find salvation and escape from God's coming wrath (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 5:9).