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Presentation Transcript
Managing Anger
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May 12, 2016

Many people believe that it's wrong to get angry. Are you one of those? Did you teach your kids not to be upset – not to get angry – that it was disrespectful? Well, a Christian can know that it's really not true that it's wrong to be angry by considering an observable truth.

Jesus got angry and yet, He never sinned. We have a picture of Him in the scriptures overturning tables in the temple, while castigating those who sold sacrificial animals to people at exorbitant prices. Right? There's that example for us.

Let's go to 1 Peter 2:21, where it says:

1 Peter 2:21 – *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His steps.*

So anger is a part of life and God gets angry sometimes. Well, having said that, then, we can all think of instances where anger produced negatives results in our life and the lives of others, as well. So, that brings us to the title of this presentation – *Taking a Look at Our Emotions – Part 6 – Managing Anger.*

Anger can be either positive or negative. We have seen, earlier in this series, that every emotion can be either helpful or harmful, depending on how we use it. So I'm not going to cover old ground here. If you missed the first two parts of the series, where we talked about that, you can go back and cover it again, if you like. Just go to our Website – liferesource.org – and you can look it up there under the series tab. Suffice it to say, however, that means that anger can also be helpful or harmful. So, taking it deeper, let's take a look at ways to express anger.

One of the best tools for doing this that I've found comes from a book by Dr. Ross Campbell called, *How To Really Love Your Teen*. He has an anger ladder that spells out a progression from most harmful to most helpful ways of expressing anger.

So, the first one that he has on the list – and the most negative – is *passive/aggressive anger*. I know a young teen who forgets many things that her mother wants her to do, and that frustrates her mother to no end. The daughter is angry with her mother and punishing her for the demeaning way her mother has treated her all her life. This is the worst kind of anger, because it's more difficult to deal with than other forms. So that's his highest level of anger.

The second one is anger expressed in *violent or destructive behavior*. People who can't refrain from hurting others or destroying property often suffer serious consequences, such as incarceration, reprisal or loneliness or isolation. Movies are filled with this kind of behavior, but in real life, it almost always works against the angry person.

The third one is *to be in a fit of rage, but able to prevent violence towards others or damage to property*. You know, you can still consider this kind of anger to be losing it or what we call, low-mood functioning, where the cortex shuts off and the emotional part becomes overly active – a verbal assault, hurtful and insulting words, a personal verbal attack that's uncontrolled. We see that in the movies a lot, too, and yet, in real life, if that happens, it's very destructive to relationships.

His fourth level is *to vent anger verbally without seeking to attack anyone with words* – maybe like through criticism – not trying to hurt anybody, but just out of control – maybe too critical or too rude.

The fifth level is the same as above, but *limiting remarks to the provoking issue and to the provoking person* – not just spewing on everybody, but targeting the person that is in question.

And then, finally, *to the provoking person as pleasantly and rationally as possible with the hope of resolution* – and that would include understanding the other person's perspective. Most of us never come to this point of maturity in our lives – at least, not consistently.

So I find it helpful to have an awareness of this kind of structure in talking to people that have anger problems because they can find themselves at the level of behavior they're at, and then, when they start making improvement, they can recognize, "Oh, I didn't go over the top like I always do."

I once explained to a fourth-grader how to tell when she needed to call the police during times when her parents were angry with each other. I explained that sometimes parents argue loudly. It's scary to hear, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to get a

divorce or anybody is in danger. And I told her that that's sometimes how parents resolve problems and find ways to get closer. And then we talked about what she could do if it was too hard to hear. She could go outside, listen to music with earphones on, or go visit a friend. But, I told her, if alcohol is involved, with throwing hard or heavy things, if there's pushing or hitting, then somebody could get hurt and people are no longer safe – and everybody has a right to be safe – so it's okay to go next door and call 911. And interestingly enough... I mean I'm hearing this girl talk about how dangerous it is at her house, and yet I'm not really in a position to intervene. It was interesting that a year later – I think she was in the fourth grade when I told her that – in the fifth grade, she *did* call 911. Her drunken father dumped her mother, who was disabled, out of her wheel chair in a fit of rage. So the girl called 911, her father was arrested, and spent a month in jail. Interestingly enough, he came to see me after he got out, and I was surprised to find that he had made the beginnings of a turnaround. He stopped drinking and he thanked me for teaching his daughter what to do in that situation. He felt that it was the beginning of a new life. I never heard any more about it, so I don't really know to this day whether that was true or not. It helped the girl to have a ladder that she could see where she could judge things. And it helps people to know where they are on that ladder, as well.

Another thing to think about is anger at home. We talked a lot about helping children and teens in our series, *Practical Christian Parenting* – you could look that up on the Website, too.

- Letting teens know it's good to let parents know when they're angry is a very helpful thing. Otherwise they're going to go passive-aggressive or get more angry. It's okay to discuss the issue when calm, not when everybody's upset.
- To educate teens using that graduated approach, if necessary.
- To encourage them if they *are* making progress with it.
- Also, to use the anger management tools that we're going to talk about below.

So, anger at home – one, the first thing there we talked about is helping teens with anger – that there is a way to have anger and deal with it appropriately, and that it can be a helpful thing to get things out in the open – and then, to have some tools to manage it so that anger goes the right direction, instead of a destructive one.

But let's talk about parental anger toward children. That's one of the biggest things that parents tell me about when they come to my office. They think it's okay for them to get frustrated and disrespectful to their kids, but not for their kids to be frustrated and disrespectful toward them. So, you know, it's got to go both ways. When we are angry with our kids and we're trying to discipline them, it more or less immunizes them against learning anything from the consequences of their behavior.

You know, I've always used that example of getting a ticket from a surly cop, and then one from a polite cop. When you get a ticket from the surly cop, you think, "What a jerk!" And

when you get a ticket from a polite cop, you think, “What a jerk I am. I knew better than that!” When we’re angry, all of our focus goes on how unfair the other person is and we don’t think about our own behavior at all.

So, any parent who wants to help their kids become responsible human beings, has to learn how to discipline them without anger. Why? Well, because it makes them angry. How do you react when somebody’s angry with you? Most of the time, you get angry at them.

Let’s go to Ephesians 6:4.

Ephesians 6:4 – *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.* Well, how would you do that? By being angry at them or by being unfair. ...*but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* The idea here is, if parents get angry with their children, eventually, they won’t accept God’s ways later.

One way to reduce anger and increase receptiveness is our next point – and that’s *parental respect for children*. Most parents think that God gives us children and that we’re to help them mature. And that’s certainly is true, but God also gives us children to mature us.

I was talking to a boy some time ago, who’d been sent to me because of his anger. He’d been suspended from school because he’d been in so many fights. His mother had been remarried – I think within the last two years – and every time he referred to his stepfather, he always called him a disrespectful crude name. He never once referred to him as Dad or even by his first name. He was *so* angry – not just with his stepfather, but his mother for marrying him – and he was getting in a lot of fights at school. And he got in one away from school that landed him in the court system, because the school authorities couldn’t buffer him from the police in that case. So he was suspended and involved in the court system for that fight he got into. And, as his therapy unfolded, he revealed that his mother had moved here in order to live with her new husband, uprooting this boy from the life that he had in his former place. And then once he got established, she moved clear across town, and so it was like moving to another city. He told me that his stepfather appeared to be coasting off his mother’s efforts. He had no job and he didn’t seem to be looking for one. Now, it was true that his father was a highly educated person, but the kind of work that he did is usually the kind of work that comes and goes. And also, he was probably between jobs, but in this boy’s mind, it looked like his stepfather was just worthless and using his mother to support him.

Now, his mother’s solution to the school problem was to leave this boy home alone with his stepfather and a computer to do online school. He told me that his stepfather would not help him with it at all. And I can understand why, because the kid was so angry. It didn’t take too much to figure out that this boy wasn’t going to be successful at school on the computer, left unsupervised. And he did fail another year of high school.

And when he would tell his mother that he thought it was unfair to have to move, she would only say that he had to suck it up and that she deserved a life, too. And, of course, his thought was, “Well, what about me?” So the two adults in his life seemed to put their own needs ahead of his own every time. And that infuriated him. And you know, I do believe that parents do have to have a life, too, but these two adults, really, had very poor skills at communicating to their son.

Let’s talk about kids dealing with anger between parents. I mentioned the example of the little girl with the disabled mother and the drunk father. When parents fight, it frightens kids and they *always* think the worst. You know, if I had a nickel for every kid that told me they thought they were responsible for their parents’ divorce, I could retire. So, if you can’t discuss the situation without anger, or go somewhere else – if you don’t have enough self-discipline to not argue in front of your kids, then you should consider that help is needed. Communication needs to improve.

I have quite a few couples who, in times past, couldn’t come and sit calmly and discuss an issue. And I suggested to one couple that they do some individual therapy to resolve their own triggered anger. They were triggering each other about their past stuff. Once they both did that, they didn’t need couples therapy any longer. They were bringing their old stuff to the table and that was getting in the way of their marriage. Once they took care of it, things got a lot better in a hurry for them.

Why do some people have a harder time with anger? Well, there’s one reason that stands out above all the others – at least, *now* it does to me. That question would have been a mystery to me some years ago, but the answer, actually, is based in brain research, where it points strongly toward the importance of the parents in the life of a child – as a child and as an adult. So what happens to us in the first year of our lives has a lot to do with how we manage our emotions ever after. The ability to regulate emotions develops in the first year of life. It occurs as parents care for and interact with their babies.

I touched on this one already in this series, but I don’t think I’ve really given it the justice that it deserves. There is somebody who can say it better than I, however. His name is Dr. Allan Schore, a UCLA brain researcher and attachment theorist.

(This is an insert. If you’d like to learn more about how we learn to manage our moods and emotions in the first year of life, you can go to YouTube and look up Allan Schore and view his 50-minute presentation called, *Modern Attachment Theory*. Now back to the presentation.)

So given that parents affect their children in a profound manner, what can parents do to manage their own anger? Okay, so here comes of the anger management tools. I don’t think of these things as the *best* thing to do. I think of them as something we all can benefit from, but I think finding out why we’re getting angry and getting to the root of it is a much

better solution than managing it. But that said, we all still have to manage it. A really, really important aspect of anger management is *catching it early*.

Anger is always felt in the body first, unless – do you know what the *unless* is? – we talked about it earlier in this series – anger is always felt in the body first, *unless* a defense mechanism is preventing us from feeling it. Remember, all emotions have three parts: *awareness* – “I’m angry” – a *sensation* – “I can feel it in my shoulders, or my fists, or my jaw, or wherever” – and then an *impulse* – “I want to sock him in the face.” It’s very important to be able to tell we’re getting angry – before we get out of control – to know where we feel it in our body *first*, then we can usually head it off – at least, most of us can. If we *can’t* find it in our body, then we need to get past the defense that’s preventing us from feeling it. In my experience, that usually requires help from somebody that knows how to do it. But, if we *do* catch it earlier enough, then we’re able to use other tools, like breathing and counting. Now, if you’re already in a full-blown tantrum, breathing and counting probably isn’t an option anymore. And even if you could do it, it probably wouldn’t help that much.

What is breathing and counting? Well, we talked about that earlier as well. Breathe in for a certain count – like 5 or 6 – and then out for the same count, and then hold your breath for the same count. And you keep doing that until you start to feel out of breath a little bit. You don’t want to feel out of breath too much, because that makes you anxious. So you drop the number. Now you’re down to 6 or 5, and then 4, and then 3, and so on.

Okay, another one – that would be the third one – the first one being, catch it early, second one being, breathing and counting – and then, *no one makes us angry but ourselves*. That old saying, “He made me mad?” No way – no truth to it. Your amygdala produces emotions appropriate to the kinds of thoughts you’re thinking. When we get angry, it’s because of the way we’re thinking. We all have negative life themes that frequently contribute to that – ways of thinking about ourselves and others. “Always the victim,” one of my clients said about himself. So, he always felt like he was getting picked on, and mistreated, and life wasn’t fair, people weren’t fair, people were taking advantage of him, manipulating him, treating him unfairly. No wonder he was angry all the time!

What do you catch yourself thinking when you’re angry? I probably need to do a presentation on the thinking piece. We haven’t talked too much about that yet. That part can often be corrected without much direct effort, aside from therapy. So, you can think about, “How do I always think about difficult things.”

The fourth and final thing that I wanted to bring up is – and we talked about this already, too – *dealing with triggered anger*. In the family, children tend to bring up our childhood wounds and the anger that goes with them. So, if we have unresolved wounds from our childhood, our children’s trying behavior can bring up the old anger from the past.

I had a man come to me some time ago and he came because he was in an accident that included a fatality – a child was not wearing a seatbelt and was thrown out of the car and killed. He was in the other car. He wasn't at fault, even though he was driving. The driver of the other car was. Just seeing that dead child threw him into PTSD. But, in the course of this treatment, I learned that he had grown up in a terrible, terrible family situation. His father would get drunk a lot and he would beat his wife. I think when the boy was four, she abandoned the family. She just disappeared. The drunken father turned the three boys over to his parents, who clearly weren't very good parents either. He told this story about what it was like growing up. He did go, for a time, and live with his mother's parents, and they were pretty good, but he said that just gave him a small taste of what it should be like, and then he had to back and live with his father and the other grandparents. So he and his brothers were very angry kids. And as I learned more about his life, he'd pretty much alienated his two daughters because of his angry outbursts. He been divorced once and married to somebody else that was having a hard time living with him, he said. He said he thought he *looked* angry, because people would always shy away from him because he looked like he was so upset all the time. And I think he could probably see that. So, he knew that he needed to change, but he was unable to change on his own. So, I think on week 16 of his treatment, he came in with a large folder full photographs – old black and white pictures of him and his brothers, and his mom and his dad, and his grandparents – his father's parents – in the house where he lived.

He told me this whole story. He didn't gloss over anything hard. And he didn't overdramatize anything. It was just a matter-of-fact explanation about what life was like for him, as a kid. When he got done, I said, "Why did you bring these photos in *today*?" And he said, "Because last night, my wife and I were going over these photos, and when we got done, she said, "Do you realize that this is first time you've ever been able to look at these pictures without going into a rage?" And then he looked at me with a big smile, and he said, "I'm getting better!"

You know, that was really a great story for him – that he could see that he was making improvement. The point there is, sometimes we just can't do it on our own when it's coming from way back.

You know, I try to help people in the independent Church of God find a therapist in their area that can help them do that kind of work, and once in a while, I run into this comment from people: "Well, I don't think that somebody that's not in our church, could understand me enough to help me overcome this kind of problem. Somebody...they have to be in the church – they have to be converted – before they can help me with my problem." If you'll just think about this: Are the problems created by the Holy Spirit? Or by human nature?" The outside therapist probably wouldn't understand the Holy Spirit, but they certainly would human nature, wouldn't they? And so they would be perfectly qualified to help somebody like my friend here with his problem, even if he was a member of the Church of God.

I have tried to help some people like that – that just couldn't get over the fact that they needed somebody in their own church. But most of the time, it's just not true. There are lots of good EMDR clinicians around the country. I think there are 5,000 in the United States. In bigger cities, there are hundreds of them to choose from. So, there's help available, if you have the resources to pay for the help. And insurance can usually help with that.

Okay, so that's a little bit about how to control anger. All these management things I told you about...the problem with them is, they only work if you work them – the breathing and all of that sort of thing, and trying to control you thinking, and things like that. It's much better to just get rid of it, like my friend there, who went through the pictures and, somehow, just didn't get angry and didn't even realize he'd overcome a good bit of the problem.

Don't forget to look at our Website – liferesource.org. We have quite a bit there about *Mental Health and the Bible* and anger.

So, until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.