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Taming the Temper

(Part 2)

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Series: Tough Choices

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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In Psalm 139 David marveled at the omniscience, the omnipotence, the omnipresence, the sovereignty, and the love of God. He concluded with the words:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23,2 NIV4)

Notice the three verbs, “search me,” “test me (or try me),” and “lead me.”

Praying like David is both necessary and dangerous when we are looking into the mirror of God’s Word. Such prayer is necessary because knowledge without understanding puffs up but does not build up. Information without application is often not only nonproductive, but counterproductive in that it leads us headlong into Satan’s landmines and lies, resulting in spiritual pride. It is dangerous because we need to know how truth applies to us, and sin surfaced must be dealt with or we become both increasingly accountable as well as increasingly insensitive to correction. The psalmist was saying that God has a threefold plan for transformation, but we must be willing to ask for it.

Step 1: Search me, O God, and know my thoughts. Apply this information to the grid of my spiritual temperature, Lord, and give me a report. Tell me, Lord, how do I stand personally where this truth is concerned?

Step 2: Try me (test me). What a dangerous prayer that is! Put me on trial, Lord, and reveal my heart. Bring circumstances into my life that will test these particular principles and give me a grade. The goal is twofold: to know my own heart—what kind of choices I will make when the heat is on and to see if there be any wicked way in me—to surface sin.

Step 3: Lead me (the object). So you, O God, having searched my heart and tested my responses and revealed my sins, lead

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me in the way everlasting and give me the mind of Christ in all situations.

THREE KINDS OF ANGER

The essence of anger surfaces in detail in the New Testament where the descriptive Greek vocabulary seems to reflect three expressions of anger that simply are not acceptable to God.

As we look at those three, we will try to give them titles more in keeping with our frame of reference so we can easily recognize the symptoms as they appear.

1- Short-fused anger

The first kind of anger we must put away is the short-fused type.

From the time the flame touches a short fuse until the point of the explosion, there is not enough time for the winds of reason to blow it out. Every spark leads to fireworks. It is a temper too irrational to be restrained.

When a person's emotions are so dominant that retaliation is a natural response, reason is an unnatural response. This kind of anger is characterized by the temper being out of control, a response of the will to the emotions of the moment.

Cain was an example of short-fused anger that resulted in murder. Potiphar had short-fused anger. It sent Joseph to prison. The Scriptures are full of examples. Our own experiences reflect it.

Short-fused anger results in words spoken that should not have been spoken, reactions and responses that bring grief and shame. It brings the heated retort to the clerk in the store, the angry, sullen look at the dinner table, the reaction of self-justification that destroys our testimony when we are rebuked or corrected.

Short-fused anger is more prevalent when we are tired, discouraged, under pressure, physically ill, or under attack. Satan knows that. So he lets our emotions get stretched to their limits through grief, or pain, or trial. When our skin is thin and our nerve ends exposed, one of the kids will do something that the day before would have produced a settled, predetermined, consistent response. But when the fuse gets short, we don't stop to think. We act on our feelings and the road behind us is paved

with regrets.

We need to learn to read the signposts in our own lives, and when we sense we are stretched to our emotional limits through fatigue or pain or pressure, we need to make a covenant with God not to respond without first praying and asking him to give us his response from the Word.

A short-fused Christian is emotionally “hyper,” so Satan knows that when the right set of circumstances is applied, the person will overreact and go down in defeat. Scripture tells us to “put off” once and for all short-fused anger. It is never acceptable behavior for God’s man or woman.

2- Teakettle anger

The second kind of ungodly anger we will call teakettle anger. Into the teakettle we pour resentment. We bottle it up, we control our responses, but internally we are having make-believe conversations with the objects of our anger. We have all done it, haven’t we? We produce our own TV shows in our minds where we are “telling them off.” Gradually the temperature rises. A small infraction is blown in our mind to be an international crisis. It is only a matter of time. The pressure builds. Then one day, we have a chance to hurt the one who offended us. Our personality changes. The teakettle boils over and we attack.

Afterward, we may actually “feel” better. We got it off our chest. We released that pent-up resentment. We “feel” so good we may even think it must have been God’s will. But it wasn’t. We were nursing a grudge, feeding resentment with bitterness. Scripture says we must not so much as carry resentment from one evening to the next morning.

Aaron was guilty of teakettle anger in Numbers 12. He let resentment build into jealousy until it exploded into full-scale rebellion.

Jonah was guilty of teakettle anger, too. He let resentment build over God’s will for his life. To him the results were predictable. So he did two things angry people do. First he ran and then he pouted.

Needless to say, God found him and used him, but still Jonah nursed his bitter spirit. Later we see Jonah’s response to the multiplication of his ministry.

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But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

(Jonah 4:1 NIV)

Jonah was not short-fused angry; he was pouting, resentful, nursing a grudge over the inconvenience of doing the will of God, over the audacity of God to send him where he did not want to go.

Teakettle anger destroys a lot of homes, a lot of churches, and a lot of friendships. The wife with teakettle anger has never really forgiven her husband for the mistakes he made years ago. She says the right things. She sounds sweet and is spiritual and even submissive, but inside the bitterness lingers, the pressure builds. Then one day, for no apparent reason, she lets her life be ruined by anger she never even realized she had been harboring.

Teakettle anger is the kind of resentment that boils inside and blames life's problems on parents or heritage. Society's solution is to transfer responsibility to someone or something in our past beyond our control. This allows us to harbor resentment toward parents or society or God so we can "accept ourselves." Parents, problems, and pressures become the scapegoats of our lives.

Harboring an angry spirit until it destroys us is no solution. The real answer is to understand that we are responsible for our own choices and for our responses to life's calamities. It is not our parents' fault. It is not God's fault. It is not society's fault.

Thousands of people with worse parents than ours or with no parents have survived and become spiritual giants. Others have lived through the same traumas of childhood that have left us bitter; and where we have failed, they have become over-comers and more than conquerors. Those scars have become their stepping stones and emblems of grace.

The key is to accept the responsibility for our own choices and for our own responses to the unfair deals this world has given us. This world isn't fair! Not since sin entered it. Accept it!

Having assumed our rightful responsibility before God, we must take it all to the Cross and leave it there. Then, when Satan tries to make us angry, we must tell him to go see Jesus. We sold Jesus our past. He bought it with his blood. It is blasphemy to harbor that anger.

If we do not open the lid on our teakettle anger and pour out the contents into God's pool of grace, one day the lid will fly off, and we will lose control. If we are to tame the temper, we

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cannot harbor any grudges, nurse any old wounds, or rehearse any secret retaliations in our private thoughts. The kettle must stay empty. Then the pressure cannot build.

3- Day-in-court anger

The third kind of anger is more sophisticated and more acceptable, and therefore even more dangerous. It does not show itself in an uncontrollable rage or build necessarily by nursing a grudge. It simply demands and moves to protect its rights in whatever ways are necessary, often quietly, often through retaliation or contention or even through a competitive spirit.

When we got held up in the grocery line, it is not that we went off in an uncontrollable rage. It is not that we were nursing a grudge. But we have only so many minutes in a day, and our right to our time was being violated by that woman in front of us. And we were angry. We had a right to be, didn't we? No, we didn't! We were suffering from "day-in-court" anger. "Day-in-court" anger is the attitude of resentment that reflects the violation of our rights or reputation. It leads us to believe that if we had our day in court, we would win.

We deserved that place in line, better service at the garage, better food at the restaurant, better traffic on the freeway, a better response from our loved ones.

The problem is, we've already had our day in court. And we lost.

We all sinned and came short of the glory of God. But the Judge, the Righteous One, who tried the case and found us guilty also paid the penalty. His own Son died in our place. He set us free. When we accepted that pardon, we surrendered our day in court for an eternity in the presence of God, where there will be no tears, neither pain, nor sorrow, for the former things are passed away. Meanwhile, we've been bought with a price.

Now God owns us—our possessions, our time, our families, our rights, our reputations, our very lives. The things we cling to, the things we get angry over, the things for which we would demand our day in court are not ours anymore. They belong to God.

So it is not our job to protect our rights. It is his. If we can fully grasp the sheer freedom that truth gives us, we can be set free from the prison of anger.

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There are at least two rights to which we mistakenly cling. First is the right to our possessions. Imagine the freedom of walking into your office and honestly being able to say, “Hey, Lord, somebody took your fountain pen. Thanks for letting me use it for so long.”

First, we should do a stewardship check and be sure we were not careless with God’s pen. Then, when we are sure it was not slothfulness, we should let Good reveal his love as he provides us either another pen or contentment with our twenty-five-cent ballpoint.

You say, “You are bothering God with fountain pens? He has a universe to run!” No, my friend, God is concerned about fountain pens. He has taken the time to note every sparrow that falls. He has numbered the very hairs of our head, noted every tear we have ever shed. God cares about everything we care about. God owns it all, and he can take care of what is his.

The cattle on a thousand hills are his. He fashions every snowflake, names every star, knows the number of grains of sand on every seashore. He can handle his fountain pen, the one he has let you use. He can handle his car, the one he lets you drive, as well as his house, the one he lets you live in. They are all on loan. He will give; he will take away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

So if someone backs into your car, you should just turn to God and say, “Lord, I’m sorry about your car. Show me how you want it repaired.” The cleaner ruined your new suit? No need for ulcers or tirades. Just say, “Lord, about that suit you loaned me. Thanks for letting me use it, but I was getting a little proud anyway. So thanks for taking it away.” If the cleaner pays for it, let God get a new suit for you to borrow if he wants to. If not, praise him for the old one.

Perhaps we all ought to take a piece of paper and deed our “things” back to God. We should make a substitute car title and transfer it to God. Then if it breaks down we do not have any basis to get angry. We need to transfer our house back to God, too. It is his house anyway—not ours. Then when the plumbing breaks, we do not need to lose our temper. We just say, “Lord, you’ve got a broken pipe. I’m so thankful to have you for a landlord.”

We need to deed over our jewelry, our stereos, our stocks and bonds, our investments, our appliances. They are all his. As Job

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said,

...The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised. (Job 1:21b NIV)

We just happen to like the “gave” part better than the “take” part. So we memorize half the verse.

We are living in tough times. Bankruptcies are soaring, businesses are failing, jobs are scarce, money is tight. None of us knows what these next years hold.

But Christians do not need to panic. Even if we have a crash, we will not have lost a thing. We never owned it. What we do own are treasures in the heavenlies, and they are stored in a heavenly vault. There they are imperishable, uncontaminated, unfading, where moth and rust do not corrupt, and where thieves cannot break in and steal.

Everything we truly own is secure. What we do not own is not our problem. So what is there to get angry about?

We also cling to what we think of as the right to our reputation. A person’s concern for his reputation is not a new problem. Jesus’ reputation was challenged too. But Jesus had no reputation to cling to. He gave it up—for US.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

but made himself nothing (of no reputation), taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8 NIV)

He gave up the right not to have his reputation attacked, not to have his name challenged. He had an unchallengeable name, but he gave it up. So when they reviled him, he answered back nothing, according to Peter, but rather he committed himself to the Father (1 Peter 2:23).

You say, “But that was Jesus!” But the verse that precedes this passage in Philippians reads,

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

(Philippians 2:5 NIV)

He made himself of no reputation. We should consider ours the same. He took upon himself the role of a servant; we must do

exactly the same.

If someone assaults our good name, that is God's problem. We should tell him about it and leave it up to him.

If someone attacks God's name, that is cause for anger. But if someone attacks our name, if we are of no reputation, what have we to lose? Is that radical theology? No, that is normal Christianity.

Paul had the picture. He had every reason to cherish his reputation in the flesh. In the next chapter of Philippians, Paul went to great lengths to explain why, humanly speaking, he had a right to defend his reputation. He was, in every way, an exemplary Pharisee who had met all the standards of his peers. But he concluded,

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ

and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own...
(Philippians 3:8,9a NIV)

Paul said, in effect, "What reputation? What possessions? That's all garbage to me. It doesn't matter what men say or what men do so long as I may come to know him and to appropriate his power and to enter into his sufferings (even, if necessary, into rejection) that I may be conformed by death to his life."

Satan challenges us in many areas: our right to success, our right to pleasant circumstances, our right to presume on God's will, our right to life itself, our right to friendships, our right to beauty or strength, our right to be heard, our right to another's offenses, our right to avoid the reaping of what we have sown, our right to be right, and our right to see right behavior in others.

We must examine why we get angry every time our "rights" are threatened. Sometimes our response shows up as short-fused anger. We let our emotions run our lives and when we are hurt or jealous or rejected, we lose control. The bomb explodes. And the debris is scattered all over the lives of those we love and those God loves, whose lives are touched by ours.

Sometimes it shows up as teakettle anger, a slow, boiling resentment over the past that festers into a bitter spirit and then, when all the circumstances are ripe, the steam goes out, the

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kettle screams, and somebody gets burned.

Sometimes it reflects itself in day-in-court anger, the quiet, deliberate, “proper” kind of response when our rights or our reputation have been challenged. We deliberately choose to retaliate for losing something we never owned.

You ought to, right now, sign your possessions and your reputation back over to God. Do it as a family. Make a plaque or a title deed and frame it as a reminder. Then when the enemy begins to whisper in your ear, “Somebody stole your pen; somebody scratched your car,” you can honestly relax and smile and say, “Satan, take that up with my Father. It’s his pen and his car, and I’m his, too. God gives and God takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

When we ask God to search us and test us to surface our choices and surface our sins, and we feel the pangs of anger surge up within us, we must stop and ask ourselves, “What rights am I clinging to that are not mine?” Then we should begin a list of the vulnerable areas where our rights get in God’s way so that we can give them back to God. In other words, let Satan catch us dead to rights, and alive instead to the Righteous One. Then we won’t need to be angry Christians anymore.

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FOCUS ON APPLICATION

1- List the three steps to transformation listed by David in Psalm 139:23, 24.

2- Are you willing to pray that prayer regarding unrighteous anger in your life?

PROJECT

Prayerfully consider as a family deeding your car and your home and your bank account (symbolically) back to God. Then, when you are tempted to anger through the claiming of the right to your possessions or reputation, gently acknowledge that all you are and all you own are now the property of Jesus Christ-and rest!

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Paraphrase (write in your own words) Philippians 3:4-10, followed by Philippians 2:3-11. Using these passages as a backdrop, go back and determine the godly response to each of the anger producing situations at the beginning of the last chapter (car on freeway, woman in grocery store, etc.).

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