

Righteous Indignation

by Harmon A. Baldwin

Righteous indignation is a holy and selfless emotion that is essential for correcting wrongs and upholding justice, but it must be controlled and not allowed to become sinful.

Scripture: Psalm 37:8, Proverbs 14:29, Proverbs 29:11, Mark 3:5, Romans 12:19, Ephesians 4:26, Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8, James 1:20

Topics: "Righteous Anger", "Christian Discipline"

Description

Harmon A. Baldwin delves into the concept of righteous indignation, exploring the fine line between this and what is commonly known as anger or impatience. Various definitions and distinctions are presented, highlighting the difference in character and degree between carnal anger and holy indignation. The sermon emphasizes that righteous indignation is free from selfishness, elevating, and ennobling, while carnal anger stems from an unholy principle in the soul and is belittling and demoralizing. Baldwin also discusses the importance of discipline and upholding the requirements of the law without vindictiveness, for the glory of God and the good of humanity.

Transcript

We are often asked to explain righteous indignation, and to show the difference between this and what is commonly called anger or impatience. This is a difficult question, and we have looked in vain for some person who has drawn a satisfactory distinction. Some writers seem to approach an explanation, and then stop short, leaving us still in the dark. Most of them allow too much, and the only difference they see between righteous indignation and real, Simon-pure anger is in degree and not in quality. If any one has found a good definition and distinction it would be a blessing to bring it forward; but we mistrust that the real answer can be known only by experience; it can not be expressed in words. Nevertheless we may be able to give some light. We will first bring forward a few authorities and then add some thoughts of our own.

Definition. "Anger: Violent, vindictive passion or emotion aroused by injury or insult, real or imagined, and directed against the cause thereof; sudden and strong displeasure; wrath; ire." "Indignation: The state of being indignant; a feeling involving anger mingled with contempt or disgust, aroused by injustice, meanness," etc. (Standard Dictionary).

"We may be angry and sin not; but this disposition may become sinful, and this in the highest degree. It is so when it is excessive, when it is rage, and makes us lose control of ourselves. It is so, and may become

a vice, when it leads us to wish evil to those who have offended us. It is resentment when it prompts us to meet and repay evil by evil. It is vengeance when it impels us to crush those who have injured us. It is vindictiveness when it is seeking out ingeniously and laboriously means and instruments to give pain to those who have thwarted us. Already sin has entered." (McCosh, in "Motive Powers").

"Anger is not evil per se. The mind is formed to be angry as well as love. Both are original susceptibilities of our nature. If anger were in itself sinful, how could God Himself be angry? How could He, who was separate from sin and sinners, have looked round upon men with anger? An essentially immoral character can not attach to it if it be the mere emotion of displeasure on the infliction of any evil upon us. Anger may be sinful, when it arises too soon, without reflection, when the injury which awakens it is only apparent, and was designed to do good" (McClintock and Strong).

"All anger is by no means sinful; it was designed by the Author of our nature for self-defense; nor is it altogether a selfish passion, since it is excited by injuries offered to others as well as ourselves, and sometimes prompts us to reclaim offenders from sin and danger, but it becomes sinful when conceived upon trivial occasions or inadequate provocations; when it breaks forth into outrageous actions; vents itself in reviling language, or is concealed in our thoughts to the degree of hatred" (Buck's Theological Dictionary).

"If ye have a just occasion to be angry at any, time, see that it be without sin: and therefore take heed of excess in your anger. If we would be angry, and sin not (says one), we must be angry at nothing but sin: and we, should be more jealous for the glory of God than for any interest or reputation of our own. One great and common sin in anger is to suffer it to burn into wrath, and then to let it rest. * * * Though anger in itself is not sinful, yet there is the utmost danger of its becoming so, if it be not carefully watched, and speedily suppressed (Henry, comment on Eph. 4:26).

"Anger is not always sinful; this passion being found in Him in whom was no sin. But then it must be noted that anger is not properly defined by philosophers, a desire of revenge, or causing grief to him who has provoked, or hath grieved us; for this desire of revenge is always evil: and though our Savior was angry with the Pharisees for the hardness of their hearts; yet He had no desire to revenge this sin upon them, but had a great compassion for them" (Whitby).

"It would be proper to express displeasure at what was wrong, on many occasions, in the management of families, in reproofing sin, and even in ordering their temporal concerns; so that all anger was not absolutely prohibited: yet let Christians be very circumspect and vigilant to restrain that dangerous passion within the bounds of reason, meekness, piety, and charity; not being angry without cause, or above cause, or in a proud, selfish, and peevish manner; not expressing their displeasure by reproaches, or the language of vehement indignation; or suffering it to settle into resentment and malice: but always endeavoring to subordinate the exercise of it to the glory of God, and the benefit of the offender himself, as well as that of others; and to show stronger disapprobation of the sin committed against God, than of the injury done to themselves" (Scott, comment on Eph. 4:26).

These are samples, and the reader will see that while some of the writers quoted approach the verge of drawing a distinction between righteous and unrighteous indignation or anger, they all stop short of the mark, and only make the difference reside in the degree and not in the character of the passion. But we believe that there is a vast difference in the character as well as the degree. We will venture a few suggestions, only inklings of which we can find in any other place. The reader is at perfect liberty to either

accept or reject what we have to say:

1. There are two kinds of anger, carnal and holy. An example of the former is found in Cain when he slew his brother, and I fear that some of the writers quoted above had that sort in mind in their comments. There are various examples of the latter even in the life of Jesus: Our Lord's anger was not only not sinful, but it was holy indignation, a perfectly right state of heart; and the want of it would have been a sinful defect. It would show a want of filial respect and affection, for a son to hear, without emotion, his father's character unjustly aspersed. Would it not be a want of due reverence for God, to hear His name blasphemed, without feeling and expressing indignant disapprobation?" (Scott, on Mark 3:5).

2. Carnal anger is not necessarily aroused by a thing which possesses moral quality, and may be manifested on the most trivial occasions, as, when a man pounds his thumb, or because of a mosquito bite. Anger which is not sinful is always manifested towards or on account of moral evil; as, when your daughter or some other person's daughter is insulted by a vile man.

3. Carnal anger springs from an unholy principle in the soul. Righteous indignation does not, and may be, and often is, a result of holiness itself.

4. Since carnal anger springs from an unholy principle in the soul, and since the ground work of sin is self (the sinful self-life, or carnal selfishness), then carnal anger is a selfish emotion, arising from a feeling of personal injury, or the transgression of one's rights, or the crossing of one's plans or ideas, or a disturbance of his pleasures. This might be extended to refer to fancied or real injuries to others who are more or less connected with us or our plans. Righteous indignation is free from the principle of selfishness and is stirred by seeing others maliciously injured, or when God is insulted, or God's laws and the laws of righteousness are ignored or abused.

5. Carnal anger is belittling, degrading, and altogether demoralizing. Righteous anger, since it refers primarily to the assistance of the weak and the overthrow of wrong, as well as the glory of God, is elevating and ennobling.

6. The more sinful a man becomes, as a usual thing, the more terrible his angry passions are stirred. The more holy a saint of God becomes the more he hates sin. Like his Master he is angry at sin all the day long.

So-called righteous indignation becomes sinful when it takes on a self-centered or selfish character.

Adam Clarke seems to take this general view of the question: Commenting on Eph. 4:26, he says, "Perhaps the sense is, Take heed that ye be not angry, lest ye sin; for it would be very difficult, even for an apostle himself, to be angry and not sin. If we consider anger as implying displeasure simply, then there are a multitude of cases in which a man may be innocently, yea, laudably angry; for he should be displeased with everything which is not for the glory of God and the good of mankind. But, in any other sense, I do not see how the words can be safely taken."

This same thought is brought out in the explanation of the synonyms for "anger" in the Standard Dictionary: "Anger is sharp, sudden, and, like all violent passions, necessarily brief. Anger is personal and usually selfish, aroused by real or supposed wrong to oneself. Indignation is impersonal and unselfish displeasure at unworthy acts, i. e., at wrong as wrong. Pure indignation is not followed by regret, and needs no repentance; it is also more self-controlled than anger. Anger is commonly a sin; indignation is

often a duty."

The reader will readily see that the above thoughts draw the line in the character of the passions. One is carnal and is cast out in the article of holiness, the other is a necessary accompaniment of holiness, and resides even in the character of God.

One more thing: Some parents are fearful of correcting their children, lest they themselves should become angry, and as a consequence the children are softly allowed loose rein. Discipline is necessary. We need policemen, judges and jails. A policeman, judge or jailer could be sanctified and yet uphold the requirements of the law. Some people have a soft idea of holiness. One person said that if a sanctified army would catch the Kaiser they would hug him to death! If some sanctified officers, then, would catch a highwayman, they would love and hug him, or a murderer, or an adulterer! No, sanctified men would see that such persons were put where there would be no possibility of them injuring the public, either in morals or person, and they could do it without the least vindictiveness, and to the glory of God and for the good of men.

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