

Anger Management 101: Temple Tantrum

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple" by Pieter Bruegel

Prayer of Illumination

Holy and Merciful God, amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises by living in faith and obedience; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

What would you say are the most iconic religious cathedrals or temples in these countries?

France? Notre Dame

England? Westminster Abbey

India? Taj Mahal

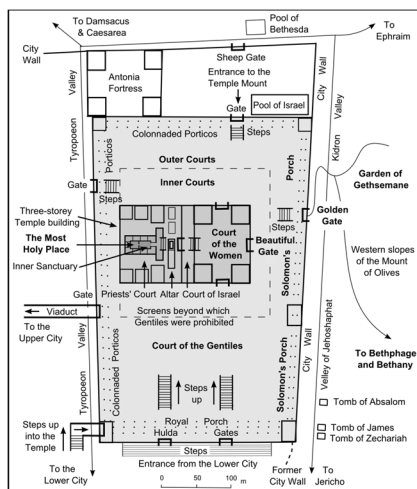


United States? I'd probably have to say televangelist Joel Osteen's sports stadium turned Lakeside Church. Just kidding!

Well, for ancient Israel it was the Temple.



The Temple rebuilt by Herod the Great was one of the most magnificent human structures in the world at that time.



- The Temple covered an area of about 35 acres.
- It was in the shape of a trapezoid.
- There were 35 foot-tall columns.
- 1000+ foot long walls surrounded it.

Not all of the complex was indoors.

The first outer space was the **Court of the Gentiles**.

Anyone, Jew or Gentile, could enter this space.

At the backend of this court was a wall that posted this sign:

If a Gentile passes this wall, they will suffer the penalty of death.

The next area was the **Court of Women**.

Unless women came to offer a sacrifice,
they could proceed no further than this boundary.

After this was the **Court of Israelites**.

Here the congregation gathered on special festivals.

And it was here that the priests were given
offerings by the people for sacrifices.

The innermost part of the temple was the **Court of Priests**.

This is where priests sacrificed the offerings that the people gave them.

Only the priests were allowed in.

The setting of our Scripture reading today is in the **Court of the Gentiles**. There was a long-standing religious practice in Judaism that animals sold for sacrifice were not to be sold in the temple area, but rather just outside the temple premises, usually the Mount of Olives. The Gospel of Luke tells us that after Jesus' birth, for their ritual purification, Joseph and Mary went to the temple to sacrifice two turtle doves or pigeons. This indicates that they had very limited financial resources. Pigeons were for the poor who couldn't afford lambs.

But a new trend was beginning around Jesus' time: the buying and selling of sacrificially pure animals took place not on the **Mount of Olives**, but in the **Court of Gentiles**. In other words, an originally sacred place became a business district. A place of prayer for people of all nations became a marketplace for the hawking of temple certified pigeons and livestock at gouged prices. Road weary pilgrims who needed to exchange their currency were dinged with extra fees and penalties—usually, half a day's worth of income. The temple authorities also jacked up the prices for the turtle doves—often 15x the regular price. They were making a killing in the sacrifice business.

The trading of sacrificial lambs in the wrong place, and with inflated prices, got Jesus' goat. It wasn't just the sheep who were being fleeced. God's people, the sheep of his pasture, were being fleeced. It was well-known among the Jewish people that these shady and predatory dealings were going on in the temple. The Talmud even spoke about it. But no one spoke up. They just put up with it. It was like a pebble in their sandal, that they didn't bother to remove. People turned a blind eye. Shrugged. It's just how things were. But just because something is, does not mean it should be.

This is where Jesus and anger come in to shake things up. Jesus would not be silent or complicit—even if it cost him his life. He was infuriated that the poor vulnerable traveling pilgrims were being exploited and hoodwinked by temple marauders and bandits—wolves in sheep's clothing. Last week in the wilderness temptation, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy to the devil. Today Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah:

"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

But this **House of Prayer** was now more like a cross between a 4H Competition and The Mall of Israel. But there was still yet another problem. People were using the **Court of Gentiles** as a shortcut to get across town. The temple became a time saver, not a place of worship. This too was spoken against in the Jewish Mishnah:

"A man may not enter into the temple mount as a shortcut."

Instead of communing with God in worship, the temple became a highway for commuting to work. Jesus blew the whistle, stopped the intersection traffic, ushered in the true worshippers, and blocked the way for illegal business commuters. He didn't stop there. You could see the intensity in his eyes, as he began turning over tables. He even pulled a Bobby Knight and threw the pigeon dealers' chairs down for effect. Yet Jesus was in control. He kept teaching the people as he did all this, quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures as the furniture flew. Jesus was fulfilling prophecy before their eyes from Zechariah 14:21:

"There shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day."

Enough is enough. This was his Father's house of prayer—for all nations, all peoples. Every shade of skin-tone was welcome. No worshipper was to be denied access. Jesus was standing up for the little guy. And standing against the elitism and exploitation of the day. Standing for worship in spirit and in truth. Jesus was upholding the Jewish law, not breaking it. And the people were spellbound by his message. Several decades later this glorious temple would be destroyed in 70 AD.

Let's hear now the word of the Lord from...

Scripture: Mark 11:15-19 (NRSV)

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers."

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Anger Management 101: Temple Tantrum

Jesus is so human. So divine, and so human.

Jesus slept—got tired, like we do.

Jesus wept—felt emotional pain, like we do.

Got hungry—he fasted and he feasted with the disciples.

Got thirsty—one of his last words on the cross was I thirst.

He grew physically weak—Simon of Cyrene had to help him carry his cross.

Jesus felt pain—he let out a cry of pain on the cross before he breathed his last and “gave up his ghost.”

And of course, Jesus got angry in his *temple tantrum*. He didn’t always turn the other cheek—this was not the situation for that. Jesus got angry, *but sinned not*.

Jesus managed and used his anger the right way, as Aristotle said:

Be angry for the right reasons,
with the right people
at the right time,
and for the right length of time.

Jesus not only had a dimmer switch and a volume dial on his anger, but an ON and OFF switch. Fully human and fully divine, Jesus used his anger redemptively—to purify and clean. To protect, empower, and release. He didn’t hurt people or hold grudges with his anger. He forgave. But he also expected change. The status quo would not do.

So, what is the definition of anger?

I love the word “anger” in Biblical Hebrew. Anger is literally translated in the Old Testament as “pregnant nostrils.”

- Your nostrils begin to show.
- You have a glow about you.
- You’re bulging with anger.
- Your nostrils are pregnant.

How far along are you?

And when the Bible says that God is slow to anger, it literally means God is long of nose. The equivalent in our language is “God has a long fuse.” But he does have a fuse.

Seneca described the negative side of anger as this:

“Attaching great value to petty things.”

The essayist Montaigne in his essay "Of Anger" said this:

"There is no passion that so much transports people from their right judgment as anger."

Now there are basically two kinds of anger:

- First, Shock and Awe Anger. This is from the Type A hot head. They let it rip, roar, and rage—in a moment's notice.
- And then secondly, there's Crock Pot Anger. These folks are slow cookers, taking their time with stewing and brooding—milking anger like it's a precious little baby, tenderly and attentively nursing and coddling your slight. Crock Pot anger involves resentment, nagging, hen pecking, and passive aggressiveness.

Garret Keizer in his book *The Enigma of Anger* defines anger as an "emotion of extreme frustration poised at the possibility of action..."

He goes on to say the purpose of anger is to—

*break loose, to struggle free,
and at the most basic level to survive
and to change the normal or customary course of things.*

When you're angry, you believe change is possible. At least desired. You want action. But remember, the end never justifies the means. Jesus was attuned to this. He was meek, but he wasn't weak. He was no pushover, but he pushed over the tables and chairs in the temple. He didn't like God's people getting taken advantage of.

You see, anger is NOT ALWAYS a deadly sin. It's not a sin to feel anger or to express anger. It's human to feel anger. We need anger. If you don't ever feel anger—check your pulse and make sure you're not a corpse.

For much of my life, as a recovering people pleaser and peacemaker, I've been asleep to my anger. I hate conflict. My natural instinct is to ignore it. Pretend it's not there. Just live with it. In the past I would bury conflict or try to please or appease others, at all costs. Even at the cost of my own self-respect and other's well-being. But passivity and the avoidance of conflict doesn't make it go away, it only heightens conflict and makes it fester. The pebble in the shoe snowballs into a boulder if it's not attended to.

Buried, avoided, or ignored anger also leads to several other things:

- A. Chronic crankiness.
- B. Depression.
- C. Blowing your top like Mt. St. Helens.
- D. All the above.

It's taken much self-examination and painful mistakes in my own life to finally wake up to my anger, pay attention to it, not suppress it, and appropriately experience and express it, with awareness, rather than just impulsivity. To control it, rather than be controlled by it. I've learned to get more comfortable with being uncomfortable. To move towards conflict rather than away from it.

In the midst of our imperfections, with the leading of the Spirit and God's grace, and a good dose of courage, disciplined anger helps you accomplish health and well-being for individuals and the community. I believe this is one of our biggest challenges as human beings and Christians. Our relationship to anger is a life-long trial and error exercise for all of us. Grace and forgiveness is needed. We have a calling to grow in grace and wisdom in this vital area of our lives.

So the question is: What do we do with our anger as Christians? How do we best express it? How do we find that Golden Mean between not too much anger (aggression and violence) and not too little anger (passivity and apathy)? Discernment is needed.

Sometimes, it's a sin NOT to be angry.

- Poet T.S. Eliot described Jesus in the temple as Christ the Tiger. It wouldn't have been right for him to be the Lamb of God in that situation, even though he was that.
- C.S. Lewis chose a lion as his Christ symbol in the *Chronicles of Narnia*—Aslan. Aslan's good, but definitely not safe.
- In the book of Revelation Jesus is both a "roaring lamb" and the "bleating lion."

On the other extreme, anger crosses the threshold into a deadly sin when it gets ratcheted up to wrath and vengeance. Basically, this is attempting to play God. We get self-righteous and destructive with our anger, rather than it being restorative or constructive. What do angry people often say? G** D*** it, right? That's no accident. Unhealthy anger is playing God. You see yourself and yourself alone as an Army of One. And when you look behind the wake of that one lone soldier—there's not only a trail of tears, but burned bridges and a scorched earth. It's one of the most tragic scenes ever, and it is replayed countless times throughout human history.

Now the Bible teaches, "God is slow to anger...." But notice that the Bible doesn't say, "God never gets angry." Can you imagine if a parent or teacher never got angry with a child who did something inappropriate? The child would become coddled and spoiled rotten—a tyrant. They'd have no understanding of consequences. They'd understand only their rights, but not their responsibilities. It's cruel and unloving NOT to express appropriate anger because you would be creating... a monster. That's not good for the child or for you or for society.

But then, don't forget this:

- Parents, never, ever abuse a child. Ever.
- Men, never abuse your wife—physically, verbally, emotionally.
- Women do not verbally or emotionally abuse your husbands. Even a man's soul can be crushed.

Well, let's go back to today's Scripture. Notice Jesus controlled his anger—his anger didn't control him. In our passage, Jesus taught WHILE he had his *temple tantrum*. He knew exactly what he was doing and why. His wits were about him. It was part of his lesson plan—he thought it through. He was in control. He was mentoring. Being an example. Modeling an emotion. It was show and tell time. A field trip to the temple. Jesus' *temple tantrum* showed us how to apply anger to injustice. Being meek involves standing up to the bully—to protect the innocent.

Tough love courageously says, “Not in MY FATHER’S HOUSE OF PRAYER.” The temple shenanigans weren’t merely an annoyance to be endured or an interest to be preserved. Anger helped Jesus call a spade a spade—to talk about the elephant in the room, without being sheepish about it. The temple robbery must stop NOW. Worship of the living God needed to be restored.

Jesus not only cast out unclean spirits in the Gospels, he cast out predatory lenders and venders in the temple. Yet Jesus never played dirty, never was spiteful or passive aggressive with his anger. He could be stern but he never would browbeat people. Jesus was gutsy, he wasn’t afraid to upset the apple cart. And it cost him, right? Jesus didn’t retire early and enjoy his golden years, did he? He didn’t die of old age, right? No, he was crucified in his early thirties. Jesus’ *temple tantrum* reached the ears of the chief priests and scribes. As a result, they plotted to kill Jesus because they feared him.

Fear causes us to do weird and dangerous things. Unchecked and unfounded fear leads to unhealthy and extreme anger. But the Scriptures teach us: *Fear Not*. You can be scared, but fear not, for I am with you. Perfect love casts out all fear.

The crowds were spellbound by Jesus’ teaching. Still, Jesus and the disciples had to leave Jerusalem by the cover of night because of his display of anger.

So what are some practical ways to manage our anger today?

First, laugh. Life isn’t very fun and we often get into serious trouble when we take ourselves so seriously. Laugh and laugh at yourself, too. Genuine humor chases anger away.

Second, get good sleep. We get irritable when sleep-deprived. When we’re well-rested we’re usually more fun and reasonable. As one of my theology professors said, “Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is sleep.”

Third, use your anger like salt—sparingly. Don’t pour the whole saltshaker on your eggs. Don’t dump salt on your dessert or other people’s wounds. Incessant scolding is despised by others.

Fourth, let the emotion of anger move you to action in areas where true injustice is taking place. Keep your anger always flavored with: compassion, mercy, respect, and non-violence. And always remember, the end doesn’t justify the means. Don’t be either a bully or a doormat.

Fifth, address the problem or the behavior, not the person.

Sixth, you can be angry at God (just read the Psalms and you’ll see)— but don’t get bitter or let your heart get hardened. Keep talking with God.

Seven, try to look beyond the thing that’s angering you— don’t let it be all-consuming. There are other things in life too.

Eight, take a deep breath and count to ten. Montaigne in his essay on anger said these timeless words over 400 years ago:

“When the pulse beats, and we feel emotion in ourselves, let us defer the business; things will indeed appear otherwise to us when we are calm and cool. ‘Tis passion that then commands,

'tis passion that speaks, and not we... Faults seen through passion appear much greater to us than they really are...

In other words, never have a conversation, make a phone call, or compose a text or email when your blood is boiling. Wait on it—preferably a day or so. Talk to someone else for perspective on the matter. Medical science shows us that unchecked and suppressed anger is worse for your health than high cholesterol and smoking.

Nine, look beyond the “injustice” for possible explanations before jumping to conclusions and assuming the worst. Assume the best first.

- a. Was it an accident?
- b. Is there a good reason?
- c. Did the person just forget?
- d. Are there unknown factors?
- e. Did you listen to them?

Ten, practice self-awareness and self-criticism—know yourself. A little self-doubt is healthy. Ask yourself if you do the same things that you’re angry about with others. Ask yourself “why am I feeling this way? Am I missing something?”

It’s wise spiritual practice to doubt your certainty. One person put it this way: The size of a person can be measured by the size of the thing that makes him or her angry. Remember, love covers over a multitude of sins—be quick to shrug things off when appropriate. And then forgive and ask for forgiveness—but that doesn’t mean things will stay the same. The relationship will likely need a new normal.

Finally, remember God is judge—“Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.” God is a merciful Judge—not us. We need to discern things, but we’re not judge. Let go and let God do the ultimate judging.

The Prince of Peace counsels us in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

In other words, seek peace and pursue it, but don’t be an appeaser. Peacemaking will at times, inevitably involve conflict to get the situation or relationship to a place of genuine peace and well-being.

Let us close with this prayer:

Lord, when my buttons are being pushed and I feel angry, help me realize that I need to forgive just as I have been unconditionally forgiven by you.

Amen.

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