



Changing Lives, Minds, and  
Communities through Jesus Christ

# Anger: It's All in How You Think

by Becky Beane

## “A quick-tempered man does foolish things” (Proverbs 14:17).

That, in a nutshell, is our most common problem with anger. When our anger flares up, we often act in ways that are irrational and destructive.

- A gang member feels “dissed” because of the way a rival looks at him, so he pulls out a gun and shoots him.
- A shopper in the line at the grocery store fumbles for her money, and the man behind her cusses her out for holding everybody up.
- A man is late for dinner, and his enraged wife dumps the whole meal in the garbage.
- While in the chow line, one inmate jostles another, who turns around and slugs him.

Anger can be triggered by a threat—real or perceived—in about *one-thirtieth* of a second! That’s according to Arizona psychologist Lynne Namka, who has worked with countless angry people. A lot of rapid-fire thinking can take place in that fragment of a second.

For the person who often gets angry—and often way out of proportion to the “offense,” as in the examples above—it is important to understand and change distorted ways of thinking.

Why? Because in prison, angry reactions can get you into trouble with the officers—robbing you of privileges, getting you stuck in segregation. It can put you on the outs with other inmates and your family. And chronic anger can tear you up inside—mentally and physically—causing headaches, digestion troubles, insom-

nia, high blood pressure, skin rashes, depression, heart attack, and stroke. Who wants that?

We all know how prison can crack your sense of “cool.” It strips you of your freedom, diminishes control over your life, and deprives you of respect. We may think hostility *gives* us more control. It doesn’t. Usually it reveals our *loss* of control, our feeling of powerlessness, our hurt pride. It’s a far greater display of inner control when you can stay cool and unflinching under stress. So how can you get there?

In his book *Prisoners of Hate*, prominent psychiatrist Aaron Beck explains that anger may *seem* like the first emotion triggered by a threatening event (because it happens so fast). But it’s commonly preceded by distress—a feeling of hurt or anxiety. The meaning we attach to that feeling—our interpretation—is what leads to the anger. Here’s a quick way to look at it:

**Event → distress → interpretation → anger → mobilized to attack**

When we’re distressed, our thinking gets self-centered. Irrational thoughts spring up automatically, conditioned by past feelings and events. Let’s look at the *most common types* of irrational thinking that distort our views and feed our anger.

### Irrational Thinking

#### 1. Running with assumptions.

An assumption is something that may be true . . . or not. There may be many reasons something happened, but we hit on one and act as if it is *true* before we fully check it out. For example, we are “sure” a person intentionally bumped us, when the reason may be that he just wasn’t paying attention.

#### 2. Claiming personal rights.

We turn desires (I *want* to be respected) into entitlements (I have a *right* to be respected!). Then we jump to fight for the protection of our “rights.” The grocery store shopper who barked at the woman in front of him may have believed he had a *right* to get through the line without waiting. She violated his right, so she “deserved” to be punished.

#### 3. Imposing rules.

This might also be called the “tyranny of the shoulders.” We place rigid rules on other people—often without their knowledge. “He should have listened to me.” “She should be home when I call her.” “He should treat me with more respect.” If he breaks the rule, he must pay.

#### 4. Overgeneralizing.

This kind of thinking is reflected in words like *never* or *always* or other terms of exaggeration. “You *NEVER* listen to me!” “He *ALWAYS* picks on me.” “I have to do *ALL* the work in here!” Naturally, the more a person overgeneralizes, the more upset he gets. As Dr. Beck explains, “It is obviously far more painful for a person to be ‘always’ mistreated than mistreated on a single occasion.”

#### 5. Thinking only in blacks and whites.

This is extremist thinking. Something—or *someone*—is either all good or all bad; all right or all wrong. There are absolutely no in-betweens, no shades of gray. This black-and-white thinking spills over into relationships and interactions: I’m right, you’re wrong. I’m the victim, you’re the offender. Once we develop an image of a person as “bad,” we will screen out anything that contradicts that image. “So what if he gave \$1,000 to charity. He did it just to get his name in the paper.” There is room

only for competition—win-lose; no room for cooperation or compromise—win-win.

## 6. Demonizing people.

We project onto people the image of the Enemy, who threatens our safety. Often such images are projected on whole classes of people—blacks, whites, women, guards . . . prisoners. Perhaps *you* have felt demonized by many in the outside world. Aren't all prisoners just animals that need to be caged?

Dr. Beck explains that at first we *homogenize* a group: Then we strip them of their identities as unique individuals. Then we *dehumanize* them: We view them as something subhuman that we no longer need to care about. Finally we grow to *demonize* them: We transform them into the embodiment of Evil—which clearly must be punished or destroyed.

### Changing the Way We Think

If how we think about things can lead us into anger, then changing our way of thinking can help get us get out of it. Consider these ideas:

#### 1. Wait before you act.

The Bible wisely cautions, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to

become angry" (James 1:19-20). This kind of response gives you time to evaluate your thinking. Walk away if you have to. Count to ten. Take a few deep breaths.

#### 2. Apply the rules of evidence.

Look at all the evidence—pros and cons—regarding your situation. Especially notice any evidence that might *contradict* your generalizations (always, never, etc.) about someone. This will give you a more realistic picture of the person or situation you're dealing with.

#### 3. Consider alternative explanations.

There may be many possible reasons for a person's behavior. Take the woman whose husband was late for dinner. She assumed his lateness meant he didn't care about her. But suppose she instead considered other explanations: Maybe he was in an accident. Perhaps he had a flat tire. Perhaps another person had a flat tire, and he stopped to help. Depending on what she thinks, she might feel afraid, sad, proud. The point is, there could be many different explanations, so get more information before reacting.

#### 4. Modify your rules and rights.

Start thinking in terms of desires: "I *wish* that my wife would be more sensitive"

instead of "she *should* be more sensitive."

#### 5. Focus on problem solving not punishing.

Consider the other person's perspective as well as your own. It keeps us from focusing on who's right and who's wrong, who wins and who loses. The husband and wife might decide that if one person is going to be late, he or she should call the other—so that wrong assumptions don't run wild.

#### 6. Don't make other people responsible for your feelings of worth and security.

Remember *God* values you. As you grow more secure in your relationship with God, you won't need to make others responsible for your feelings. Your worth isn't based on whether someone else treats you with respect. Therefore, your worth isn't *diminished* if someone treats you with disrespect. So is there really any need to punish or retaliate?

#### 7. Be willing to forgive.

The topic of forgiveness requires a whole separate article. But remember who our example is. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

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## From Rage to Ruin

For an example of how irrational thinking plays into our anger, we can go back to the very beginning of human history. The very first humans, Adam and Eve, had two sons, Cain and Abel. Here is what Genesis 4:2-8 tells us:

*Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.*

*Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."*

*So Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.*

What happened in between the rejection of Cain's offering and the act of murder? Instead of taking responsibility, Cain shifted the blame to his brother. Instead of seeing sin as his enemy, Cain saw Abel as his enemy who had to be "mastered."

Here are some distorted thoughts that might have led to Cain's irrational violence:

**Abel's offering was acceptable. He thinks he's better than me.**

**My offering would have been OK if Abel hadn't tried to outdo me. He deliberately tried to make me look bad to God.**

**He's out to get me. He's *always* out to get me. I'll make sure he doesn't do it again!**

Now suppose Cain had modified his thinking to something like this:

**God's right. I tried to get by with the wrong kind of offering.**

**I'll bring the right offering. Then everything will be OK.**

See, it really didn't have anything to do with Abel!