

## Climbing Anger Mountain

By Beth Whitbeck

When my kids were young, about 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, there was a program in school that they were taught. It was called Anger Mountain. I remember looking over the materials that one of my kids had brought home, and I was so impressed with it, that I save it for future references. The lesson talked about how when we become angry we climb Anger Mountain, and as we get angrier we get higher up the mountain. The more we get mad we say and do things that are not very nice, and we say things we really don't mean. I remember my sister telling me that when her identical twins were young, sometimes they would get in a fight with each other, and one would call the other ugly! Well, when we get angry there is a physical response in our body, maybe you have heard of it: The *Flight or Fright response*. What actually is going on in our bodies is that as we get angry, scared, and mad our blood will shift from going to our brains (which we actually use for reasoning and thinking; solving problems) to our muscles (because we perceive danger), so we can be prepared to run or fight. When our blood shifts to our muscles it takes away our power to think things through.

The lesson actually talked about strategies to calm down or come down from Anger Mountain. What a valuable lesson for a second grader, or for that matter me. Today I will explore this in more detail.

What is your AQ? Not your IQ, which is your so-called intelligence quotient, but your AQ, your Anger Quota? Everyone has an AQ. Everyone has a point, a threshold, whatever you call it. If the right buttons are hit, you will get angry and start to growl, and that's your AQ, your Anger Quota. Of course, you and the people sitting around you don't look like you could be angry. As far as you and I can tell, everyone here looks calm, relaxed, quiet, and composed.

But under that cool composure there's the capacity to show anger. In some of us that anger is right now close to 212 degrees Fahrenheit -- the boiling point. At any moment, someone could say just a word, do some little thing, and you would start growling or maybe even blow up like a volcano, spewing out venomous anger in all directions. So what is your AQ, your Anger Quota? Just for fun, let me give you a test. I promise I won't ask any of you to reveal your test scores.

Imagine yourself approaching the express checkout line at the grocery store. The sign clearly says, "Twelve Items Or Less." Now you've counted the number of

items in your basket. You have eight items. You naturally expect everyone else who gets in the express line to have twelve or fewer items, as you have.

But if you are expecting to find a cheater who will get in that express line just to get quicker service, you're a prime candidate for an episode of anger. In fact, this is the first stage of anger: you expect to be made angry. You are looking for something bad to happen; you are looking for the negative.

Now then, you approach the express line. And there in front of you is a guy with more than twelve items. It's obvious he has more than twelve items; his basket is full. Will your pulse rate start to rise? Will you feel that your territory has been violated? Will you feel yourself wanting to say, "Hey, he's taking advantage of the system?" If so, then you have entered stage two of anger. You have an evil eye set on the person. You are angry. Yet most people will just ride out this wave of anger. Most people will grumble to themselves and sit on this kind of anger. Of course, you may express a friendly smile toward the cheater, but behind that smile you will have derogatory thoughts about this express line cheater; and yet you will keep quiet and try not to show your anger. This is stage two of anger.

But if things are just right, if you have had other aggravating things happen at the office, or at home, if your blood is already 210 degrees Fahrenheit, you may not be able to keep quiet. You are ready to take off. And there, suddenly, you find yourself leaning over and saying something nasty to that express line cheater: "Hey, do you mind -- you have more than twelve items. Who do you think you are?"

Congratulations, you've hit stage three. Does it feel good? Well, maybe for an instant when you let off the steam. But deep down it is a painful experience. Getting angry, losing your cool, yelling, screaming, and cursing someone is a painful experience. It is also an unhealthy experience. According to Dr. Radford Williams, a Duke University researcher, all three stages of anger damage your health, but in particular stage three. One study of anger in young men concluded that if they were prone to outbreaks of anger, they were seven times more likely to have heart disease or die by the age of fifty. In other words, anger kills. Anger is deadly.

(It was kind of funny for me, after I had completed working on the sermon, I had to run to the store. As I am driving, I got behind a car that was driving 10-15 mph. Without even realizing it, I actually started to get upset, saying to myself, "what a jerk he is!" I was starting to climb anger mountain without even realizing it. When

I started to pay attention to my negative thoughts, I caught myself, and started laughing out loud, because here I was writing a sermon about how we can control our anger, and I wasn't doing a good job at it. I think God put that car, that man, in front of me, just to teach me a lesson: so I could realize how easily we can get angry.

Anger is scary stuff, too. It is frightening to find yourself losing your temper or facing someone who is angry. As scary and painful as anger is though, you cannot ignore it, you can't pretend it doesn't exist, or that you never let it take hold of you. But then neither can we just let anger run wild. Anger has to be managed.

I suspect that many of you have in fact come here this morning seeking to manage your anger. In fact there are some, to speak tongue in cheek, who even want to manage their life with more anger and misery than they already have. What I want to do is show you eleven ways to ensure that you keep yourself in a state of uproar and anger. These eleven ways to make yourself good and angry come from the psychologist Les Carter in his book on anger. But be careful. The tendency on hearing these methods is to say "I hope so-and-so heard that. That's exactly how he acts." No, the point here is, when and where do you act like this?

### Eleven Ways to Climb Anger Mountain

1. If you want to be angry, take pride in being a perfectionist and expect perfection in everyone else. Be a picky person; make it a habit. Live with the conviction that you can mold and change the people around you. Make it a point to force people around you into doing what you know they should and ought to do. And make sure to be furious with anyone who makes a mistake, who does not do things in a proper manner and put things in their proper place. As a perfectionist be sure to fuss loudly about bills and letters misplaced, typewriter mistakes, late appointments. You will hit the boiling point in no time and help others hit the mark quickly, too. This can be summed up by a poster I bought when I was a teenager, it stated: "Once I was mistaken, but I was wrong."

2. If you want to be angry, don't listen to anyone else's view but keep pushing your own. No one else in the world knows as much as you do. Always believe that your way is the best way. State your view often and preferably with a great deal of volume. There is no need to listen to what is being said.

3. If you want to be miserable, overload your schedule. Make yourself so busy that you are always on edge, ensuring that you are like a rubber band stretched and always ready to snap at the slightest little thing.

4. If you want to be angry, expect other people to cater to your needs. After all, that's why God put other people in the world, isn't it, to serve your needs, to heed your complaints?

5. If you want to be angry, never laugh and have a good time, never be easygoing, because life is very serious business. Everything you say and do is of profound wisdom and utter importance.

6. If you want to be miserable, have no compassion for others. Show no concern for the poor and the jobless. After all, you achieved your position in life by your own hard work and diligence; let the poor do the same. Forget that the Bible talks about helping others and showing compassion, you just keep on saying, "It's their own fault. God helps those who help themselves."

7. If you want to be miserable, make fun of and put down people who are different from you. If someone else is from a different tradition, a different country, has a different skin color, and is from a different culture, be sure to talk ugly about him, using words carefully chosen to ensure that the person is looked down on.

8. If you want to be angry, practice shouting. No matter that common sense tells you that a quiet voice brings about understanding and harmony. Since your goal in life is to be miserable, when others don't see and do things the way you do, start shouting and yelling at them. This is particularly effective for creating miserable homes in which to live.

9. If you want to be angry, worship money and possessions. Remember, it is the almighty dollar that demands your time and talent. Always seek to make more money than your brother, your sister, and your friends. Be outrageously envious of the money and things they have. And, of course, always use people in whatever way you can to gain all the money and possessions you worship, no matter who gets in the way or who gets hurt on the way.

10. If you want to be angry, never pay any attention to your own faults and weaknesses. Focus instead on the faults and weaknesses of others. And above all learn to be offended at any remarks and corrections that are directed your way. Naturally this means you must never read the Bible because it could highlight some changes in your own life which might bring you peace of mind.

11. If you want to be angry, learn to nag, learn to nitpick, practice criticism and the snide remark. Learn and practice that fine art of pointing out what's wrong with other people. Be sure to point out those faults in a public place so everyone else

can see that you mean business. If you don't point out others' faults, who is going to do that for them?

There you have it, eleven ways to a life of misery, rage, and anger of all kinds, for yourself and everyone around you.

Turn now and look at what the Bible says about anger. In our scripture reading for today Jesus teaches us about anger. "You have heard that people were told in the past, Do not commit murder; anyone who does will be brought to trial. But now I tell you: whoever is angry with his brother will be brought to trial, whoever calls his brother: You good for nothing!, will be brought before the Council, and whoever calls his brother a worthless fool will be in danger of going to the fire of hell. So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God. If someone brings a lawsuit against you and takes you to court, settle the dispute with him while there is time, before you get to court. Once you are there, he will turn you over to the judge, who will hand you over to the police, and you will be put in jail. There you will stay, I tell you until you pay the last penny of your fine." Anger is no stranger to the Bible. By the fourth chapter of Genesis, the first family suffers the deadly effects of anger when Cain kills his brother Abel in a rage of anger. Moses goes into a fit of anger when he comes down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law and finds the Israelites worshipping an idol. Moses smashes the tablets, grinds up the golden calf into powder, and force-feeds it to the idol worshippers, who are then slaughtered. Moses was angry!

Of course, by far the most angry person in the Old Testament-- are you ready for this? The most angry person in the Bible is God. Again and again you read the words, "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel." It was God's anger that brought the Great Flood. God was angry when Job asked him, "Why?" It was the anger of God that brought the Babylonians to Israel where they destroyed the Temple. Almost one third of the Psalms refer in some way to the anger of God; the Psalmists are found offering prayers imploring God to turn away from wrath and anger.

In the New Testament Jesus showed anger at the money changers in the temple, overturning their tables and driving them out. Jesus was angry with the Pharisees who watched to see whether he would heal someone on the Sabbath. Mark says Jesus was grieved at the hardness of their hearts and looked around at them with anger.

Jesus expressed anger toward Peter when he shot back, "Get behind me, Satan. Your way is not the way of God." Jesus was angry!

The apostle Paul was angered by some preachers in Galatia who were demanding the Gentiles to be circumcised. In an outburst of anger, Paul said he hoped they would mutilate themselves. Paul was angry!

All these examples of anger in the Bible are negative ones. But the Bible also shows that anger is not always negative, not always bad. Anger can be positive and have a rightful place in life. As

the examples show, God, Jesus, and Paul are angry at evil, at false worship of God, at what distorts the good news. The Bible speaks of God hating evil and loving good. As one prayer goes, "God, let me love what you love and hate what you hate." The thing though is to avoid becoming a negative, destructive hater.

Anger. I don't think there's any doubt about it, anger is the most common and the most destructive emotion there is. Contrary to popular opinion, love is certainly not the most common emotion. In a few days we will be celebrating Valentine's Day, a day were we profess our love, share our love with those whom we love. So this message of anger is very thought provoking, and timely with this special day just around the corner. There are people so consumed by anger that not a ray of love penetrates their mantel. You can even see it on their faces, that frowning, haggard look. I remember the face of a man I knew who was consumed by anger. There was a darkness about his face, an edginess in his looks, with his shoulders bent down in rage. He had spent years fighting for the rights of poor and oppressed people, and it had left him angry and bitter. Have you ever seen such a face?

To be angry is such an easy thing to do. It is so easy to get angry. Anyone can get angry, and of course everyone does get angry. But to be angry at the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right way -- that's not an easy thing to do at all.

Seven Ways to help us calm down, and come down from Anger Mountain.

Theologians through the ages have suggested several ways to deal with anger.

First, make an inventory of the things that make you angry. Identify those things or persons that make you angry, and then take steps to avoid them. Better yet, seek a way to be reconciled to them.

Second, make a vow to yourself that the next time your blood starts to boil you won't blow up. Promise yourself that the next time you will stay cool and talk quietly and reasonably.

Third, consider the other person's situation. Maybe you are just too fussy, too much into control, too prideful. Maybe what that person said or did that made you so angry was in fact helpful.

Fourth, you can avoid anger by being self-critical. Remember, no one is perfect; we all make mistakes. As the saying goes, if you never make a mistake, you never learn. We all need acceptance and healing. Be humble, be patient. The journey of life is too brief and full of enough potholes without your anger.

Fifth, when your anger button is pushed, start counting to prevent a blowup. Thomas Jefferson said, "When angry, count to ten before speaking, if very angry count to 100." But then Mark Twain said, "When angry, count to four; when very angry, swear." I think what Twain was referring to is what the character Charlie, Raymond's businessman brother, did in the movie Rain Man. Driving back to California Charlie learns that his business is going bankrupt, he owes \$75,000, and some of his property has been confiscated. In a fit of anger he walks out into the

desert and starts kicking dirt and rocks and swearing vehemently at his predicament. Then calmly he gets back into the car and continues heading west.

If you find yourself getting really angry, maybe you should follow Charlie's example: kick some dirt, kick a rock or a tree; only please don't kick the nearest person to you, or even the one who made you angry. Here a rule of thumb for parents seems in order. In raising children never punish your child when you have lost your temper. Punishing children usually does call for some degree of anger, but if you are in a blind rage, the punishment can be more violence than discipline. Get control of yourself. Counting before you lose your temper, or stepping back and away, can be very helpful.

Sixth, talk your way through anger. A frank but tactful approach to the person with whom you are angry, asking him why he said what he said, can lead to reconciliation.

Finally, number seven, if all else fails, say a prayer for the strength to give up your anger. Remember this: there are only two things you can do with anger: you can let anger eat at you like battery acid, spoiling your life or even destroying it; or you can give your anger over to God. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord, "and I will repay." God is steadfast and works justice.

God will repay and right the wrongs that are suffered. Our task, as followers of God and believers in God's mercy and judgment, is to give our anger over to God for God to handle it. "Let Go and Let God." Give your anger to God. Come down off of Anger Mountain, use your brain, not your muscles to dissolve your anger; read the word of God, just give it to God. You can't change the past, there's no way; but God can change the future, if you will only permit it.

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