



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

FREEDOM FROM ANGER



WES PASTOR

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INTRODUCTION

I live in the state of Vermont. The name comes from the French word for “green mountains.” And green it is, which means we get plenty of rain — sometimes, too much. I remember one twenty-four hour stretch when Vermont’s capital, Montpelier, saw nine inches. The Winooski River overflowed its banks and the entire downtown area was flooded. Fields filled with corn and soybeans were devastated, homes and businesses damaged and destroyed.

Anger is like a river — not normally destructive, but if allowed to overflow its banks, it quickly becomes a raging torrent that leaves a wide swath of destruction. So what can we do to check our anger before it unleashes its fury? This field guide is designed to help you answer that question.

We’ll first lay a foundation by seeking to understand anger. As it turns out, anger is quite complex, and we’ll expose it by removing its many masks. Second, we’ll distinguish sinful anger from non-sinful anger and then examine why it’s critical to address all anger quickly. Finally, we’ll consider four critical components for overcoming our anger: power for overcoming anger, practical steps for overcoming anger, obstacles to overcoming anger, and finally, our hope for overcoming anger.

Let’s begin by better understanding anger.

1

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ANGER

Unmasking Your Anger

Most of us see anger in one dimension: explosive, verbally attacking, and sometimes violent. But anger can wear many faces. It might be quiet and withdrawn, pouty and sulking. It can manifest as boundless and productive energy or be loud and obnoxious. To overcome anger, we must first unmask it. So how can you know if you're prone to anger?

You might be angry if, when you think of a particular person, you engage in mental arguments with them (which, of course, you always win) or focus on their less flattering qualities. When you see them in person, you work hard to avoid them, always in an under-the-radar way.

You might be angry if you manifest certain physical symptoms, like migraines, gastrointestinal disorders, insomnia, or depression.

You might be angry if your productivity has fallen off or you have trouble concentrating even on simple tasks.

You might be angry if you're short with others (my wife calls it "flaring") or are generally impatient with life's twists and turns.

You might be angry if little children of any sort — your kids, grandkids, church kids — are a constant source of irritation.

You might be angry if the quirks of others and especially your spouse's seem constantly vexing and produce predictable grumbling.

Yes, anger has many masks. So the first order of business is exposure, for it's impossible to treat a disease if you don't recognize the symptoms.

Classifying Your Anger

Having unmasked our anger, we're ready to classify it, for not all anger is

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equal. There's a profound difference between a neutral, non-sinful emotion of anger and the sin of anger.

God has made us with numerous emotions and affections — joy and sadness, love and hate, jealousy, passion, anger, fear. There are sinful and non-sinful versions of each one. People are often fearful without being sinful, but if it reflects a lapse in one's trust in God and becomes paralyzing and prevents one from doing one's duty, now it's sin. The Scripture enjoins us, "Be angry and [yet] do not sin" (Eph. 4:26). Clearly, anger is not always sinful.

In fact, righteous anger is the proper response to all that is evil. Indeed, Phinehas was commended by God for his righteous indignation when he stopped the plague by impaling the Simeonite and his Midianite lover (Num. 25:1–15). Likewise, Samuel displayed righteous anger over Saul's refusal to obey the Lord and destroy the Amalekites when Samuel hacked to death Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:32–33).

But the chief apologetic for the existence of non-sinful anger is God himself. Scripture often speaks of God's wrath in punishing the wicked. And Jesus Christ was clearly angry at several junctures, as with the heartless Pharisees (Mark 3:1–6) and the unscrupulous temple vendors (Mark 11:15–19). Indeed, when Jesus returns, the wicked will hide "themselves ... calling to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" (Rev. 6:15–17).

Since it is possible to be angry and yet not sin, when does anger cross the line? When does it overflow its banks and wreak havoc both on others and on one's own soul?

Anger is sinful when it results in attitudes and actions contrary to the law of love, the second great commandment. Colossians 3:8 says, "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth." Clearly, Scripture is talking about sinful anger by virtue of anger's associates — malice, slander, obscene talk. Ephesians 4:31 adds bitterness and clamor; all are grievous to the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30).

Addressing Your Anger

So sinful anger harms our relationship with God and others. But isn't anger as common as a snowy day in Vermont? Do we really need to be concerned about little daily fits of anger? Do we really need to call 911?

Absolutely! Anger must be addressed thoroughly and quickly. Here's why.

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First, Scripture gives dire and frequent warnings regarding sinful anger. The “works of the flesh” include “enmity, strife, jealousy, [and] fits of anger,” and “those who [practice] such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:20–21).

James, writing to the churches to help them distinguish true faith from devil faith, admonishes them to “be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19–20). It’s the difference between being a doer of the Word and merely a hearer who deludes himself (James 1:22–25).

Jesus also makes it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that unchecked anger breaks the sixth commandment, which prohibits murder: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matt. 5:21–22). “Liable to judgment,” “liable to the council,” and “liable to the hell of fire” are synonymous phrases. Practicing anger toward one another makes one eternally guilty before God.

Anger is nothing to smirk at. A lifestyle of habitual anger marks even the most earnest professing believer as possessing devil faith and subject to God’s eternal wrath. If your life is characterized by anger, you need to dial 911, for “it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:32).

But anger is often a besetting sin even for true believers. Why declare war on it? Because unchecked anger is a river overflowing its banks, a nuclear plant in meltdown, a campfire turned wildfire. And it’s seldom silent, often manifesting itself in destructive words. James describes the angry tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8), and Matthew says that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). When sinful anger fills the heart, “malice, slander and obscene talk” invariably fill the mouth (Col. 3:8). And more violent behavior may soon follow.

So sinful anger is a threat to your soul and a danger to your relationships. It must be taken seriously and addressed vigorously. That everyone occasionally loses their temper is no excuse for giving anger a pass. Sinful anger displeases God and must be overcome.

The good news is that it can be overcome. In fact, for the believer, it is being progressively overcome from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor.

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3:18). But how? What must we know and what must we do to overcome our sinful anger? In the next section, we'll consider four critical components to overcoming anger.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How does this section shed light on your understanding of your own anger?
2. In what situations do you find yourself most angry?
3. What is the thing you get most angry about?

2

CAN YOU OVERCOME YOUR ANGER?

Power for Overcoming Anger

The power of God is necessary in all matters related to holiness, and our struggle with the sin of anger is no exception. But what is the source of that power? How does God communicate this power to hapless, helpless sinners like us? And what is the promised result of having God's power in our lives?

The Gospel: The Source of God's Power

Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The gospel is the power of God for salvation, for holiness, for overcoming the sin of anger, for everyone who believes. How does that work? Let's look to Romans 6:1–7 for the answer:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For the one who has died has been set free from sin.

Paul is saying that if you are a believer, you were united to Jesus in his sin-killing death by faith alone. This union with Jesus in his death is the best assurance that one day you will be united with him in his resurrection. But how were you united?

The Holy Spirit: The Instrument of God's Power

When you came to Christ, an amazing thing happened. God's Spirit joined

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you to Christ in his death. He gave you a new heart. Specifically, he circumcised your old heart by removing the foreskin of sin that formerly dwelt there and controlled your heart (Rom. 2:25–29), and he empowered your new heart by inscribing God’s law upon it, enabling you to walk in its statutes, albeit imperfectly (Ezek. 36:26–27, Rom. 8:1–4, 2 Cor. 3:1–3, Heb. 8:10).

He filled you with himself and thus initiated the process of filling you completely with the Triune God at Christ’s appearing (Acts 1:4–5, 2:4; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 3:15–19). And the Holy Spirit sealed you, being the downpayment for your future inheritance and union with Christ in his resurrection (Rom. 5:9–10, 6:5; Eph. 1:13–14).

So God’s Spirit is the instrument of God’s power, freeing you from sin’s dominion: “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). So what’s the value of your union with Christ in his death by his Spirit? Sin’s power over you has been broken.

Read that again: sin’s power over you has been broken! The old self was crucified (Rom. 6:6). Sin no longer has dominion, for the one who has died is freed from sin’s power (Rom. 6:7). As Paul says, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:17–18).

Freedom: The Result of God’s Power

The work of Christ as revealed in the gospel is the source of God’s power in you, and the Spirit of Christ, who joins us to Christ by faith, is its instrument. And the result? Freedom! Freedom from sin’s suffocating dominion. Listen again to Romans 6, this time verses 12–14:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Sin’s reign has ended. Believers are now free — not to sin, but to present themselves and their members to God for righteousness. There’s a new sheriff in town and his name is Jesus, God’s Son, and when he sets a person free, that person is free indeed from sin’s mastery (John 8:36). Hallelujah!

Romans 8:12–13 says this of the Spirit’s work: “So then, brothers, we are

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debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Notice Romans 8:13 is not a commandment, but a description of the normal Christian life. All true believers are progressively, by God’s Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the body because they are no longer debtors to the flesh. As Paul said earlier, believers are “not in the flesh but in the Spirit” (Rom. 8:9), for “the mind that is set on the flesh ... does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7–8).

But there seems to be a catch. If Christ truly sets us free from sin’s controlling power, how do we explain the Romans 7 “believer” who still appears to be enslaved in some way to his sin? If we’re truly free to respond to life’s twists and turns with joy and not anger, what do we do with Romans 7:13–25?

In these verses, Paul seems to be describing a believer’s struggle with sin:

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ... For I delight in the law of God. (Rom. 7:15, 18–19, 22).

If this man has been freed from sin, how do we explain his inability to resist the law of sin which indwells him (Rom. 7:20–21)? Is this not clear evidence that believers, even the great Apostle Paul, are still somehow enslaved to their sin?

However, a closer examination of the passage reveals that the Apostle Paul is describing his life *before Christ*. We see this first in Paul’s own description of himself. Romans 7:14 says, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.” Surely one who has been redeemed from slavery to sin cannot be sold under it.

Paul continues: “I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:18–19). He continues: “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Rom. 7:22–23). The Romans 7 man is consistently defeated by and enslaved to sin, marking him as unregenerate, which follows Romans 6:1–23, 7:1–12, 8:1–17 and texts like John 8:36.

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We must also consider the main point of the passage. Paul is seeking to exonerate the law as the cause of his death and instead, place that charge squarely on sin. The question that introduces the passage — “Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?” (Rom. 7:13) — controls all that follows. Paul is inquiring as to the cause of the unbeliever’s condemnation, not the struggle of the believer’s sanctification. And his answer is crisp: Condemnation — spiritual death — was caused, not by the holy, righteous, and good law, but by indwelling sin. The passage has nothing to do with the believer except to explain his bondage to sin before Christ set him free. His pathetic cry as an unbeliever: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death?” is answered by God: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24). Jesus Christ through his Spirit sets the prisoner of sin free (Rom. 8:2).

So Romans 7:13–25 describes a person enslaved to sin and justly condemned to eternal death. This person was not in the Spirit, but still in the flesh, desperate for deliverance and thankful that Jesus through his Spirit has now set him free from the law of sin and death. Had Charles Wesley lived in apostolic times, no doubt the Romans 7 man would have exalted in his freedom from sin’s power singing: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night; Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray—I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”

Yes, the power of Christ’s gospel through the agency of God’s Spirit has set the prisoner free, but the residue of sin is strong. Like the odor of a dead skunk lying in the road, that sin, including sinful anger, stinks to high heaven. In the next section, we’ll consider practical steps you can take to mortify sin’s presence and dissipate its awful stench.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Did any of the above material challenge your view of anger — or any sin — in your life?
2. Can you articulate in your own words why you have hope for overcoming sin?

3

STEPS TO OVERCOMING ANGER

You are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). You can confidently battle sin, for God “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think ... according to the power at work within us” (Eph. 3:20). Praise God!

But we still need to wield that power. Here are five practical steps to take in battling sin:

1. Perceive your sinless Savior
2. Process non-sinful anger
3. Put off sinful anger
4. Put on love
5. Prepare for ongoing struggle

Step 1: Perceive Your Sinless Savior (2 Cor. 3:18)

This first step, the most important of the five, centers on the affections. Jonathan Edwards defined affections as “the vigorous inclinations of the soul.” In 1746, in his magnum opus, *Religious Affections*, Edwards asserted that, “true religion, in great part, consists in the affections,” rather than consisting mainly in the understanding. Today, we might say that real Christianity or true conversion consists mainly in the heart, not the head.

Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish preacher who lived nearly a century after Edwards, preached on “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” In that sermon, Chalmers explains the process for overcoming worldliness: “You have all heard that Nature abhors a vacuum. Such at least is the nature of the heart; [it] cannot be left void without the pain of most intolerable suffering. ... The love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world’s worthlessness. But may it not be supplanted by the love of that which is more worthy than itself? ... [T]he only way to dispossess [the heart] of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.”

What is that new affection? It’s a vigorous inclination for the Lord Jesus

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Christ himself. Thus, the first step in overcoming our sinful anger is to engage this new affection for Christ by applying the spiritual freedom we now possess. And what does that look like, engaging the new affection, applying that spiritual freedom?

Behold Christ's Beauty (Ps. 27:4, 2 Cor. 3:12–18, Col. 3:2, Heb. 12:2)

“One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to [behold] the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

We were created to love and honor and worship our Creator. But something happened: sin. When Adam sinned, all of humanity was plunged into sin with its moral impotence, unable to worship or even see God.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ changed all that. Second Corinthians 3:12–18 describes our liberation:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

In other words, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Where the Spirit is, there is freedom to behold God in the person of his Son; freedom to fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:2); freedom to set our affections on things above (Col. 3:2). Though “we [still] see in a mirror dimly (1 Cor. 13:12),” our vision has been sufficiently restored so that we can behold Christ with eyes of faith and worship our great Triune God through him.

So how do we behold him? This could be a field guide by itself. We behold him in creation, since all things were made through him; we behold him in the church, since all believers are indwelt by him; and most importantly, we behold him in the Scriptures, since all the biblical authors wrote of him (John 5:39–46). Every institution in the Bible; every prophet, priest and king; every sacrifice and covenant; everything we read about the nation of Israel; indeed, the entire Bible points to Christ and his death, burial, and

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resurrection for the sins of God's people (Luke 24:27). We behold Christ most clearly and comprehensively in his Word.

And what is the result of beholding him? Transformation!

Be Transformed into God's Image (Rom. 12:2, 2 Cor. 3:18, Col. 3:10)

We become what we behold, or as Greg Beale put it: we become what we worship.¹ Beholding Christ, who is the radiance of God's glory, results in "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" by the power of his indwelling Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17–18). Renewing our minds by setting them on the things above — principally God's Son — produces transformation into the image of our glorious creator (Rom. 12:2; Col. 3:2, 10). Gazing at Christ, our new affection, is the biblical formula for expelling sinful anger and putting love in its place.

But how does gazing at Christ practically help us with our anger? Two ways. First, as we behold our sinless Savior, we see righteous anger on display as we noted earlier. Jesus was tempted in all things as we are, Hebrews 4 reminds us, yet without sin. When we perceive his character, seeing the beauty of being angry yet without sin, we begin to move in that direction. We're being transformed into his lovely image.

Second, as we behold our beautiful Savior, we are confronted with his desperation, voiced in his prayers to God for deliverance: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence" (Heb. 5:7). Perceiving, gazing, and beholding Christ leads us to a state of increasing desperation. Obviously, if Jesus was desperate for deliverance, how much more should that be true of us? So we groan for deliverance from sin's presence, which includes our sinful anger (Rom. 8:23). More on this in step five.

Step 2: Process Non-Sinful Anger (Eph. 4:26–27)

Anger is unstable. It's like spiritual nitroglycerin in the devil's hands. And often, timing is the only thing that separates sinful from non-sinful anger, since non-sinful anger can fester quickly. Thus the apostle's plea: "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger..." (Eph. 4:26).

When Sue and I were first married I was working at mortifying my besetting sin of anger. I was greatly helped by a verse I was studying during our first summer of marriage. Colossians 3:19 says: "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them." I knew that my harshness with her was a symptom of my anger toward her.

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So Sue and I made a pact. We determined that we would not go to bed angry at one another. Not infrequently, we'd be up late identifying any anger in the relationship. If it hadn't already turned sinful, we would address it quickly per Ephesians 4:26 before it turned toxic. If it had already turned, we would proceed to mortify it following step three below.

In the moment, you may not know if the anger is sinful or neutral. The point is you can't mess around with anger, even unmistakably righteous anger. Like swinging a golf club or preparing a feast, when it comes to anger, timing is everything. You must develop a sense of urgency to address anger, if possible, before it turns sinful and poisons both the relationship and your soul.

Step 3: Put Off Sinful Anger (Col. 3:5–8)

Putting off sinful anger is a more complicated process. You must first mortify the sinful anger itself, then seek to uncover and mortify the source(s) of that sinful anger.

Mortify Anger Itself

The first step to mortifying anger can — and should — be done fairly quickly, because anger festers very quickly. There are three components to mortify sinful anger: own it, confess it, and kill it.

1. Own It (Ps. 51:4)

The various twelve step programs have one thing in common: A breakthrough occurs when the person finally stands in front of the group and owns his condition. The same is true with sin. The first step in mortifying your sinful anger is to own it: "Hello, my name is _____, and I'm angry."

When it comes to owning sin, Psalm 51:4 has always spoken to me in a powerful way. By any reckoning, David committed some of the most heinous sins one can commit against another, including adultery and murder. And he sinned against his faithful friend, Uriah the Hittite, one of David's thirty mighty men.

In response to Nathan's rebuke (2 Sam. 12), David fully owns his sin. That ownership has two distinct aspects. First, he acknowledges that his sin was ultimately against God. What makes sin so utterly sinful is that it rebels against that which is so holy and beautiful, against the God of heaven and against his good and righteous law. In Psalm 51:4a David says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." David knows he has sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba. But his offense against a holy and gracious God takes center stage.

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Second, David's ownership of his sin is unqualified. No ifs, ands, or buts. No caveats. No excuses for his sin by perhaps noting Bathsheba's unparalleled beauty or Uriah's stubbornness in refusing to go in to his wife. No assertions that the king has the right to take to himself any woman he desires, or that killing Uriah was the only way to protect his reputation and the office of the king. Psalm 51:4b reveals David's unqualified ownership of his sin as seen in his unqualified ownership of sin's consequences: "so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." David saw God's judgment against him as just because David took full responsibility for his sin.

If anger is to be mortified, it first must be fully owned.

2. Confess It (Matt. 6:12, James 5:16)

Once anger is fully owned, it must be roundly and robustly confessed, both to God and, as appropriate, to man.

It has been said that confession is good for the soul and bad for the reputation. Regardless, confession is basic to Christianity. In the Lord's prayer, for instance, Jesus teaches us to confess our sins, soliciting forgiveness from our heavenly Father for our debts: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). Such confession has real teeth, since the standard for God's forgiveness of us is our forgiveness of others. In other words, it's something of a death wish to ask God to forgive as you forgive if you haven't really forgiven your debtors. Matthew 6:14 drives home that point: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Confess your anger first to God, then to others as anger usually, like a raging river, causes much collateral damage relationally. James 5:16 is on point: "Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous person has great power."²

Confession to God is private and avoids much embarrassment. But confessing your sinful anger to others, indeed to all who were affected by it, requires humility and real brokenness. David put it this way: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). God's grace flows to the humble (James 4:6), so God's grace flows to those who confess sins to others, for few things are more humbling than a public confession.

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And public confessions stimulate prayer: “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Confessing to others unleashes corporate prayer with the promise of healing from the sin of anger which so easily entangles.

Having fully owned and humbly confessed your anger, you’re ready to plunge the knife into this deadly sin.

3. Kill It (Eph. 4:30–31, Col. 3:5–8)

By the time Paul issues the imperative to put away sinful anger in Ephesians 4:31, he has already grounded it in the glorious indicatives of the new creation. From chapters 1–3, we learn of the resurrection power at work in believers. In Ephesians 4:17–24, we learn that coming to faith means putting off the old self and putting on the new. Thus, Paul is commanding the church to do what it has already been empowered by God’s Spirit to do.

Colossians 3 is similar. The passage assumes you have been raised to new life with Christ, having died to sin’s power (Col. 3:1–4). And it assumes that “you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed...after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:9–10). Based on that freedom, you’re commanded to mortify your anger: “Put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth” (Col. 3:5a, 8).

At this point it would be entirely appropriate to offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. You are about to mortify sinful anger, to put it away, to engage in the process of killing your sin that will be completed at Jesus’ return. And this is only possible because you’re a new creation in Christ, free to mortify sin by the power of his gospel, which has joined you to his sin-killing death through his sin-killing Spirit.

The Son has set you free! Free to say no to sin. Free to stop grieving the Holy Spirit. Free to prevent sinful anger from reigning in your mortal body. Free to praise the God from whom the blessing of grace’s sin-conquering power flows. Hallelujah!

So let the killing begin.

But how? How do we put sinful anger to death? It’s not as though I *want* to be angry. My anger just seems to have a life of its own.

You need to start by reminding yourself that you have a choice. You can choose not to be sinfully angry, even when you’re justly angry. As the

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apostle exhorted, “Be angry and [yet] do not sin.”

It may seem that you have no choice because your choice muscle is atrophied after years of choosing sin. Your habitual knee-jerk reaction to disappointment and perceived injustices has been sinful anger, leaving the choice muscle flabby and out of shape. The muscle is waiting to be trained in righteousness. It needs to be whipped into shape (Heb. 5:14). It needs regular exercise to excel at godly performance — in this case, choosing not to respond with bitterness, slander, or malice.

The Holy Spirit does not mortify sin against your will, though he might break your leg in order to induce a more cooperative spirit. No, he works best with those intent on working out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12–13). And here’s the good news: practice makes progress in most of life’s endeavors, including the pursuit of holiness. The more you choose to exercise your freedom not to be angry, the easier that choice becomes.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Recently, while on vacation with my wife, I was flaring. As I confronted my sinful anger, it occurred to me that I was acting like I was still sin’s slave, acting as if the Son had not set me free from sin’s power, acting like I was powerless to respond differently. Upon this realization, I simply exercised my freedom, choosing to stop responding to my circumstances with sinful anger, and instead thanking God for his providential program custom designed to make me holy (Heb. 12:7–11).

Because of our union with Christ in his death, and through the power of his indwelling Spirit, you (and all believers) are free to say “no” to a sinful angry response. Each time you say “no,” the habit of anger is weakened, its stench dissipated. Every time you exercise your freedom, the new self within you is renewed just a little bit more into the glorious image of God’s Son.

Mortify Anger’s Source

But saying “no” to sin is not enough. Often there’s a systemic problem that causes anger to resurface over and over. To be more effective in putting away sinful anger, you must drill down into your soul. Frequently, you will discover another sin (or set of sins) that also needs to be put to death. This process is not unlike one of Jonathan Edwards’ famous resolutions. Resolution 24 says, “Resolved: Whenever I do any conspicuously evil action, I will trace it back till I come to the original cause; and then I will carefully endeavor both 1) to do so no more and 2) to fight and pray with all my might against the source of the original impulse.”

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But before addressing more systemic problems, let me reiterate that the mortification of your anger does not depend on the discovery of source tensions. You are free to put away anger even if potential underlying issues remain a mystery or go unaddressed. But identifying the source of your anger can help you mortify more systemic sins that could be provoking sinful anger.

To trace back your sinful anger and identify the source problem, often a snake pit of sin itself, you must become a student of yourself, penetrating to the bedrock of your angry behavior. A helpful hint: A good friend, and especially a godly spouse, can prove invaluable with this self-analysis.

The two most common sources of sinful anger are relational tensions and circumstances that go against your plans and expectations. Here we'll consider how to identify and address each one.

1. Relational Tensions: Clarify, Forbear, and Forgive (Col. 3:12–14)

Relational tensions with family and within the church lead the way in reasons why we get angry. From my pastoral experience, these tensions can be broken down into three categories: tensions from misunderstanding, tensions from amoral differences, and tensions from actual offense and sin. To successfully trace back your sinful anger, the best path is to consider any recent conflicts and then try to analyze the reason for the conflict. You're mad for a reason and identifying that reason will help you to resolve the systemic problem.

The first step to resolving relational tensions is simple: talk it through with the other person involved. Sometimes you will discover that it's all been just a big misunderstanding. You thought the person said and meant one thing, but upon further inquiry, you realize that you just misunderstood them. Once that misunderstanding is clarified, anger dissolves. No harm, no foul, no reason to be angry.

The second type of tension is perhaps the most elusive. It involves differences on issues that may be quite important to one or both parties, yet do not necessarily involve sin. It may be politics — what presidential candidate is best for the country. It may be approaches to child-rearing or differing views on the issue of alcohol. Or it may be different approaches to cleanliness, punctuality, or cell phone etiquette. Sue and I have different opinions about spending and saving, but those differences do not constitute sin.

What's the antidote? Forbearance. Not holding the non-sinful differences

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of others against them. Colossians 3:12–13a says it well: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another.” Praise God that you are free in Christ to forbear all those irritating idiosyncrasies of loved ones both at home and in the church. Even more so, praise God that all your loved ones are free to put up with all your irritating ways.

The third tension, no doubt, causes the most pain. Your sin of anger may be rooted in a wrong done to you, perhaps an offense that has never been rectified. You’re nursing a grudge, and it’s poisoning not just that relationship but all of your relationships. Your anger is overflowing its banks. What’s the antidote?

Forgiveness. Colossians 3:13 continues: “...and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Forgiveness means releasing on your claim for satisfaction; it means choosing to treat the debt owed as already paid. It’s the willingness to trust God’s ultimate justice.

If you clear up misunderstandings, forbear differences, and forgive real offenses, there will be a noticeable decrease in your struggle with anger. And remember, just as you’re free to not let anger reign in your life, so too you’re free to understand, forbear, and forgive even the most heinous sins committed against you. The Son has really set you free and empowered you to walk in newness of life through his Spirit.

2. Contrary Circumstances: Submit to God’s Will (Heb. 12:7–11, James 4:7)

Our systemic struggle may not be primarily relational, but circumstantial or, more accurately, providential. Life just isn’t going as planned. In fact, it may even be going contrary to your plans and expectations. This may concern your health, from an inconvenient illness to a cancer diagnosis. Perhaps an unexpected change of career or job loss. It might involve broader concerns — the economy, political change, war or the threat of it. Think of how 9/11 or COVID changed everything. In every case, God’s plan was not our plan. So how do we address anger sourced in a struggle with God’s will for our lives?

We begin by seeing the circumstance, no matter how traumatic, as from the providential hand of a wise heavenly Father. Hebrews 12:7–11 says:

It is for discipline that you endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline. If you are left without discipline, ... then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

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Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. ... For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Until we acknowledge our sovereign God as the architect of our difficult circumstances, we're tempted to see them as merely human transactions filled with injustice. This of course easily leads to anger, ultimately with God himself, and bitterness and resentment easily follows.

But when we accept that the Lord "disciplines the one he loves" (Heb. 12:5) and that pain, suffering, trials and afflictions are but tools in his hand to purify our faith, we can begin to put away our anger saying, "not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39) and "rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Pet. 1:6–8). Even the Son learned obedience through the things he suffered (Heb. 5:8) and endured the shame of the cross for the eternal "joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2). God is graciously training us to trust and obey his Word even when it's difficult.

James 4:7 says it succinctly: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." God's power in the gospel of Christ, through the indwelling Spirit that joined us to Christ, has freed you to submit to your great God and Savior in all circumstances.

And now, having put off sinful anger and its source(s), we must put something in its place, for, as Chalmers noted above, nature abhors a vacuum. As we move toward this next step, it is again appropriate and sanctifying to thank God for what he's done for us in Christ, for it reminds us that we are indeed free from sin's dominion and free to put on love.

Step 4: Put On Love (Col. 3:14)

"And above all these things, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14).

At the heart of worship is loving and adoring and beholding our great God. Indeed, the two great commandments are to love God with everything and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And love for our neighbor in Christ is the litmus test of love for God himself (1 John 4:20).

Ephesians 5:1–2 frames that love in terms of sacrifice: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us

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and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Love as sacrifice is a common theme in Scripture. Laying down one’s life for another is the greatest manifestation of love (John 15:13). In fact, we know love by Christ’s sacrifice for us (1 John 3:16). The most extended and practical expression of sacrificial love is seen in Romans chapters 12–15. Romans 12:1 says: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Thus, “to present your bodies as a sacrifice” is another way of saying “to put on love.” For the Roman believers, love required using their gifts to build up the body (12:3–8) by means of loving one another genuinely (12:9–13), without spite (12:14–13:7), urgently (13:8–14), and, with weaker or stronger brothers, deferentially (14:1–15:13). Weaker brothers are those whose consciences bind them to practices that go beyond Scriptural commands, whereas stronger brothers are not so bound. To love deferentially then is to accept one another without judgment or contempt (14:1–12) and to avoid violating the weaker brother’s conscience, causing him to stumble away from the faith (14:13–15:13).

Practically, Romans 12 exhorts us today to put on love by employing our grace gifts for the good of the body. And we love by contributing to the needs of the saints, even helping our enemies. Is there anything more Christlike than returning evil with a blessing, maybe the blessing of genuine prayer for an enemy’s welfare?

Romans 13 helps us put on love by teaching that every command in the Ten Commandments is summed up by the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Christ’s Sermon on the Mount serves as our interpretive guide. Relationships marked by purity, reconciliation, sharing, and not envying correspond to the commands not to commit adultery, and not to murder, steal, or covet (Rom. 13:8–10).

And given the nearness of Christ’s return (Rom. 13:11–14), there needs to be an urgency to putting on love. We especially need to settle our differences quickly with fellow members of the body before he returns, not letting the sun go down on our anger. If we’re sideways with a brother or sister, for instance, we should call them quickly at least to set up a future time to talk it through. We must be quick to confess and quick to forgive. And as far as it depends on us, we must do whatever it takes to live peaceably with one another (Rom. 12:16–18).

Putting on love certainly requires accepting one another, not judging each

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other for amoral differences whether weaker or stronger (Rom. 14:1–15:13). People have different worship styles — some are quite animated when singing in church while others are clearly reserved. And fellow believers have differing convictions about the activities acceptable on the Lord’s Day — some see it as a day of worship and rest while others are comfortable having Sunday season tickets to see their favorite team. Some Christians feel free to imbibe alcohol and smoke cigars while for others, it just seems wrong. Rock music, even Christian rock music is offensive to some in Christ’s church while many others see no problem. Tattoos and piercings for some can be done unto the Lord, while for others, it seems a defilement of our bodies, the temple of God. In all cases, putting on love means accepting one another — it requires a non-judgmental spirit toward those things not bound by Scripture.

But what does all that have to do with overcoming anger? It’s hard to be angry with someone for whom you’re sacrificing and laying down your life. It’s hard to be angry when your relationships are marked by an urgency to confess, forgive, and reconcile. And it’s hard to be angry with someone completely different from you when you are eager to forbear their idiosyncrasies and accept them as they are. It’s hard to be angry when you put on love.

Step 5: Prepare for Ongoing Struggle (1 Pet. 5:5–9)

This sacrifice, this putting on of love, fills the vacuum produced by putting off sin and sinful anger. Yet even with all this killing of sin, sin’s presence remains. The last step in overcoming our sinful anger combines expectations management with spiritual warfare.

Scripture reminds us that the battle with sin and Satan is ongoing: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...” (1 Pet. 5:8–9). Satan is alive, but he’s not well. He knows his time is short and he’s enraged at Christ and his church, seeking to take down as many Christians and churches as possible (Rev. 12:12–17).

Sin’s power has been broken, but the residue of sin’s presence gives our adversary plenty to work with. We have an enemy whose singular purpose is to destroy our souls by tempting us to abandon the faith. We must be ready for an ongoing struggle to the death, for as Luther reminds us, “On earth is not his equal.” But we mustn’t despair, for “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). If we resist the devil, he will flee from us (James 4:7). So what can we do to fight back?

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We can continue to offer ourselves to God by offering sacrifices of praise and prayer.

Hebrews 13:15 enjoins us as new covenant priests to offer a sacrifice of praise continually through Christ, the fruit of lips that give thanks to his name. Such a sacrifice regularly reminds us of the great work of redemption already accomplished: we're new creations by virtue of a new Spirit who has caused a new birth and created a new heart, all based on the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood, so that we will walk in newness of life; that is, walk in love (2 Cor. 5:17, Ezek. 36:26–27, John 3:3–8, 1 Pet. 1:3, Heb. 8:8–12, Rom. 6:4).

When we sing, "My chains fell off, my heart was free," we reinforce the truth that no longer are we slaves to sin but slaves to God and free to live accordingly. Old things have passed away; new things have come, including the freedom to put off sinful anger and put on love. So let us offer up a sacrifice of praise, giving thanks in all circumstances (2 Thess. 5:18).

Offering a sacrifice of prayer is another privilege and duty of new covenant priesthood. Scripture uses the daily sacrifices on the altar of incense as a metaphor for our prayers (Ex. 30:1–10, Rev. 5:8). With sin's presence so pervasive, we desperately need God's help every day, and prayer is our access to God.

For what should we pray? For strength to continue to mortify sin by his Spirit (Col. 3:5–8, Heb. 4:16), for protection from falling away through a hardened heart (Matt. 6:13, Heb. 3:12–14), and for final deliverance from sin's presence (Rom. 8:23). The Holy Spirit and creation join in the believer's groaning for final deliverance (Rom. 8:18–30). And we're assured that God will answer those groanings, those sacrifices of prayer, not only for final deliverance but for all that we need to fight sin and the devil in the here and now as well (John 15:7; Eph. 1:15–23, 3:14–21; 1 John 5:14–15). We must pray without ceasing and not lose heart, for our great God is willing and "able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us" (Eph. 3:20).

4

OBSTACLES AND HOPE FOR OVERCOMING ANGER

Obstacles

Our steps are clear, our victory sure. Still, when facing a lifelong battle against a ruthless adversary, it's no surprise that there will be obstacles to putting sinful anger to death. Most obstacles stem from the impediments already introduced in this field guide: confusion over our freedom in Christ, lack of clarity concerning the emotion of anger, and failure regarding our approach to anger.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is confusion regarding our freedom in Christ. Often, we fail to truly believe that sin's power has been broken, that the old self has been definitively put off and the new self put on by virtue of our union with Christ by faith. Passages like Romans 7 appear to somehow qualify that freedom, leaving the believer confused and lacking the confidence to continually put off sin and put on righteousness.³ But, as we have seen, when rightly understood, such passages serve to reinforce the freedom from sin's power already secured for us by God's Son.

Lack of clarity about the difference between sinful and non-sinful emotions is another obstacle to overcoming anger. As we've seen, all emotions have a neutral, amoral base that can, if managed poorly, turn sinful. Years of jumping quickly from amoral anger to bitterness and even verbal abuse dulls our ability to discern the difference, and perhaps even tempts us to deny that a distinction exists. Training our hearts to be angry and yet not sin requires clarity and time.

We can also fail in our approach to mortifying anger by failing to deal with anger in a timely way or failing to address its root. More basic, we can fail to take unqualified responsibility for our sinful anger. And we can fail to adopt a ruthless, zero tolerance approach toward anger, as is fitting for something that so grieves the Spirit within us.

But perhaps our biggest failure is to stop hoping for what God has prom-

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ised. Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him (Heb. 12:2). And we're urged to do likewise, to "set our hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:13). But what is that hope, that joy? And what keeps it from being merely wishful thinking?

Hope

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:3–5).

What is our hope? It is nothing less than a promised inheritance, an eternity in God's presence when sin is finally killed (Rev. 21:9–27), death finally vanquished (Rev. 21:1–8), and our marriage to the Lamb finally consummated (Rev. 19:6–10). Romans 8:28–30 and 35–39 beautifully communicate that hope:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. ...

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God's covenantal faithfulness to save his people is our hope, not only in overcoming sinful anger but sin in general. God has promised that all who were foreknown will be glorified, and nothing can thwart that plan; nothing can separate the sheep from the love of their Good Shepherd.

Our future — the so-called "not yet" — is certain. We have complete assurance that we shall be saved from sin's presence and from the wrath to come (Rom. 5:1–11, 8:18–39). But what locks in that "not yet" promise is the "already" of Romans 5:12–8:17. These verses assure us that God has

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already saved his people from sin's penalty and particularly sin's power. Consider all that God has already accomplished in the believer:

1. We already are no longer in Adam but in Christ (Rom. 5:12–21).
2. We already are no longer under law but under grace (Rom. 6:1–14).
3. We already are no longer slaves to sin but to righteousness (Rom. 6:15–7:25).
4. We already are no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1–17).
5. We already are delivered from the body of death, which represents sin's power (Rom. 7:24, 8:2).

We have assurance regarding God's deliverance from sin's presence in the future because we've already experienced God's deliverance from sin's power in the present. Our final victory over sinful anger, therefore, is assured. Our hope is secure.



CONCLUSION

In 1975, God was pleased to save me from my sin while I was a student at Ohio State. That fall, I learned that Jesus came to die for my sins and that whoever believed in him would be saved. When I surrendered my life to Christ at the end of that year, I experienced John 8:36; the Son set me free, not only from sin's awful and eternal penalty, but from sin's paralyzing and debilitating power. As the hymnist wrote, "My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee." Immediately, the Holy Spirit within me began mortifying the deeds of the body and I began to walk in newness of life.

It occurs to me that you may be reading this field guide thinking that you're a believer, though still enslaved to sin, or even knowing that you're not a believer. A regular pattern of sin in your life might indicate that sin's dominion has not yet been broken. Habits of sexual sin like pornography, of substance abuse with alcohol or marijuana, of anger and its ugly associates — any and all habits of sin should be reason enough for sober examination (1 Cor. 6:9–10, 2 Cor. 13:5, Gal. 5:19–21).

But here's the good news: Jesus still receives sinners, even church-going types. Don't let him say to you on that day, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). Come to Christ today and let his Spirit cleanse you, forgiving sin's penalty and breaking sin's power. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Rest completely in his work and enjoy true freedom, for "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

It's been some fifty years since I began to put my sinful anger to death. And it would be a lie to say that I no longer struggle with it. That's the nature of besetting, constitutive sins. In fact, at times, I have allowed an angry spirit to hold sway. But by his grace, I have continued to make progress in my long-standing battle with sinful anger. Allow me to share a story that may encourage you in your own battle.

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After 16 years of marriage, I received a most coveted award in the form of my wife's annual, custom-made, year-celebrating Christmas ornament, which she made for each member of the family. Until then, Christmas had been a hard time for me. To be sure, I love to give gifts to others, especially my wife and children. But I hated being forced to do it, particularly under the guise that we were somehow celebrating Christ and his birth. So for the first 16 years of our marriage, Sue had to endure a Scrooge-like husband throughout the Christmas season.

But in 1997, I made peace, accepting that Christmastime was more of a family holiday than a religious one (Gal. 4:12). This allowed me to lean into the season with genuine Christmas cheer and no sense of hypocrisy, which proved to be the significant source of my sinful anger. My Christmas countenance went from grumpy to gracious. And my 1997 ornament? A Santa hat with the inscription: "Most Improved."

Over nearly five decades, God has continued to help me mortify not only the sin of anger, but many other sins, as he continues to conform me into the beautiful image of his own dear Son. To God be the glory, great things he has done!



ENDNOTES

1. G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (IVP Academic, 2008).
2. This is the ESV alternative reading to James 5:16b.
3. Galatians 5 is a related passage whose misinterpretation has caused much confusion. For a helpful exegesis of Galatians 5:16–18, see Augustine’s commentary on Galatians.



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WES PASTOR is founder and president of The NETS Center for Church Planting and Revitalization. NETS was started in 2000 by Christ Memorial Church, which Wes planted in 1992 near Burlington, Vermont, and pastored for over thirty years. Wes and his wife, Sue, have five married children and eighteen grandchildren.

