



The anger of Jesus

There are several New Testament passages which ascribe the emotion of anger to Jesus.

In Mark 3:5, Jesus entered the synagogue. Early in his ministry there was an attempt to ensnare him; those who were present watched to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath day, since there was a man with a withered hand present on the occasion. Mark tells us that Jesus *'looked round at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...'*

As John 2:25 tells us, Jesus knew what was in man. He knew what the people were doing; he knew their motives; and he knew the very law which they were planning to use in order to trip him up. But more than that, he knew that the legalism and hypocrisy of his opponents grew in the soil of a hard heart. The effect of that knowledge on Jesus was that it *'grieved him'*, and in consequence *'angered him'*. B.B. Warfield analyses it in this way:

The spectacle of their hardness of heart produced in him the deepest dissatisfaction which passed into angry resentment. Thus the fundamental psychology of anger is curiously illustrated by this account; for anger always has pain at its root, and is a reaction of the soul against what gives it discomfort.

(PWC, 108)

So we see that **Jesus is angry because of what sin has done to the human heart.**

Mark goes on to tell us about an occasion when the disciples tried to prevent parents bringing their children to Jesus. In Mark 10:14 we read that *'when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me...'* The reaction of Jesus was one of intense annoyance, irritation and anger. The action of the disciples was incomprehensible.

It was not simply the sins of fallen men that angered Jesus, but the sins of redeemed men too. In particular, when the disciples' *lack* of compassion contrasted so much with Jesus' own compassion, he was angered by it; vexed by how little of himself there was in his followers. He is enraged, for he expects to see them open doors of service and avenues of blessing, which are closed by them instead. So we can say, secondly, that **Jesus is angry because of the disciples' lack of compassion.**

Matthew tells us of an occasion when Jesus restored sight to two blind men. He responded to their request *'Have mercy on us, Son of David'* (Matthew 9:27). Jesus touched their eyes, healed them, and then we read: *'And Jesus sternly warned them, "See that no one knows about it"'* (v30).

The difficulty in the translation is that the verb means more than simply to give a charge, but 'to be angry at', or 'to be enraged with'. Jesus 'raged against' the blind men. The word means that Jesus' intensive anger found expression. As Warfield puts it, *'Jesus is represented here as taking up a menacing attitude, and threatening words are placed on his lips'* (PWC, 111).

Mark uses the same terminology in connection with the healing of the leper in Mark 1:43. There again the idea of raging against the leper is apparent. He gave him a 'strong warning', then dismissed him. This verb, according to James Edwards in his commentary on Mark,

Is literally 'snorting' in Greek, deriving from the Hebrew word for anger, meaning 'to flare the nostrils'. The word for 'send away' is likewise stronger in Greek than in the NIV. Often used for expelling demons, the expression means that Jesus sent him packing.

(Pillar NT Commentary, p70).

Why was Jesus angry? There seems to be two views of this angry dismissal of these healed men. Some see this in the context of Jesus' wish not to draw too much public interest in himself or in his ministry until the time was right. There is a secrecy motif in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is determined to reveal the mystery of the kingdom in his own time and in his own way. The irony was that the more Christ enjoined silence, the more they kept speaking.

Others suggest that the anger was as much directed against what Jesus knew these people were going to do. They had come to Christ for healing, but would refuse to submit to his lordship. His anger is thus directed against those who wish to have the benefits of Christ's saving grace, but who do not wish to be subject to his authority. In this case, Jesus is threatening in case of disobedience.

And, in actual fact, this may well be the case. Mark 1:45 tells us that because of the man's disobedience to Jesus, Jesus could not go openly into the city any more. The fact that the leper did the very opposite of what Jesus commanded, meant that *'he was without in desert places'*. If Jesus entered the city at all, crowds flocked to him, simply wanting physical healing. The anger was directed against disobedience which would give no glory to God, and which would be of no benefit to the mission in which Christ was engaged. So, our third principle is that Jesus is **angry with those who accept the benefits of his healing power, without submitting to his rule in their lives.**

Then there are passages which show us Jesus' anger in terms of his 'rebuking' certain things, or people. Such as the demon (Matthew 17:18), the unclean spirit (Mark 9:25), or the natural elements (Matthew 8:26).

Jesus was angered by anything that threatened the peace and safety of men and women. In Luke 4:39, where Jesus shows compassion for Peter's mother-in-law who *'was taken with a great fever'*, we are told that *Jesus rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she arose and ministered unto them*. Her life, her usefulness and her service were all threatened by the sickness. Jesus was angry; and the rebuke was enough to drive the sickness away.

The disciples too, who are ready to call fire from heaven (Luke 10:54), are rebuked. They display the wrong kind of anger against men; Jesus displays a fitting anger against them, reminding them that it is not the intention of the Son of Man to destroy lives, but to save them. The fourth principle here is that **Jesus is angry at anything, or anyone, which does not accord with his own mission of saving men's lives.**

There are, however, two important passages which show us very clearly what lay at the heart of the anger of Jesus.

The first is the cleansing of the Temple (John 2:13-22; Mark 11:15-19; Matthew 21:12-16; Luke 19:45-48).

This incident shows Jesus angered, and shows us how that anger was translated into action. The business being transacted in the Temple was not the kind of business for which the Temple had been constructed. Nor was it appropriate to the business of the Temple; the house of prayer was not to become a house of merchandise.

It is possible to see in the rage that consumes Jesus a metaphor of the whole object of his work. After all, it was in the temple courts that he had said (around twenty years before), *'I must be about my Father's business'*. It was that business that now led him to cleanse the Temple, before his death and resurrection would be the destruction of the Temple (John 2:19). The old order, defiled by the sin and greed of man, needed demolishing and rebuilding. Some elements of the old order would be preserved — it would still be the temple — but the new temple would be spiritual, built on his resurrection body and power. Ultimately, he spoke of the temple of his body.

The anger, therefore, of the Temple cleansing incident (or incidents) grew out of a threat to the glory of God. The Temple, like the Tabernacle before it, had been given as a dwelling place for God's glory. The actions of the traffickers in the Temple showed how far short of God's glory man had come. Consumed with zeal, he would restore to man the spiritual blessings of which sin had

robbed him. He is angry because God's glory is threatened, and he will rage on, until by glorifying God himself in the finished work of the cross, he will restore that which he did not take away (Psalm 69:4).

The second passage which manifests the anger of Jesus is the raising of Lazarus in John 11:17ff.

In this well-known passage, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. But before confronting the state of Lazarus, Jesus confronts the state of his sisters. The sight of Mary's grief leads to the following statement by John:

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

The same emotional impact is made in verse 38: *'Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb.'*

Mary and Martha are mourning the death of Lazarus. Mary is weeping copiously. Jesus, too, will cry, in an expression conveying the deepest compassion and sympathy with the sorrowing family. But the compassion is mingled with another emotion. Jesus *groans within himself*. The word that is used here in the original Greek is the word which gives us difficulty in phrases like *'he straitly charged him...'* The feelings of Jesus were not simply of sorrow, but of anger. So Warfield:

What John tells us, in point of fact, is that Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus, in a state, not of uncontrollable grief, but of irrepressible anger. He did respond to the spectacle of human sorrow abandoning itself to its unrestrained expression with quiet, sympathetic tears: 'Jesus wept'. But the emotion which tore his breast and clamored for utterance was just rage.

(PWC, 115)

Or, as Calvin puts it, commenting on John 11:38, *Christ does not approach the sepulcher as an idle spectator, but as a champion who prepares for a contest; and therefore we need not wonder that he again groans; for the violent tyranny of death, which he had to conquer, is placed before his eyes.*

If his anger in the Temple scene in Jerusalem shows Jesus' rage at what detracts from the glory of God, his anger before the grave in Bethany shows his indignation at what detracts from the dignity of man. Sin is revealed there in its tyrannical nature, keeping man in bondage, bringing misery and sorrow into the world. Sin robs God of his glory and brings man into bondage. Jesus is angry, with the rage of a warrior who now confronts his foe with a view to dealing him a death-blow.

Jesus' anger was the response of an unfallen, sinless person, to the evidences of sin's destructive forces. May God help us to have a Christlike rage in our spirits that will motivate us to live as Christ lived, doing what we can to glorify God in the spiritual and practical wellbeing of others.

Iain D. Campbell

© 2014
www.christianstudylibrary.org