

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Putting Aside Unhealthy Emotions

by Dan Trygg

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” Ephesians 4:31

Again, it is *essential* that we see this remark set in the context of Paul's interest in helping the Ephesians to develop healthy Body-life, and in helping them to understand how to "put off the old person" and to "put on the new person. This is not just a command. It is not a "thou shalt not" in isolation from any context. The apostle gives us this background setting so that we can understand this imperative in a healthy way, ...and so that we can begin to understand how we might approach this whole area of emotion.

The first, and most evident, observation is that these are all emotions and expressions of anger. **What is anger? Anger is a natural inner response to something that is perceived as hurtful, unjust, or invasive coming into our lives.** Anger can be a good thing. It is an involuntary emotional reaction to pain, or the threat of pain. **As an emotion, it provides motivation to act to somehow resolve an unpleasant experience.** Some psychologists refer to emotions as "energy in motion", energy that arises naturally from within in the face of threat, hurt, or perceived mistreatment of some kind. In this simple way, **anger can be a healthy, beneficial emotion that serves a very positive purpose in our lives.** Just five verses earlier, Paul was advocating, even commanding, these same individuals to "get angry", ...so **experiencing the emotion of anger is not the problem** he is attempting to address.

What is the problem? Most of these words listed refer to ways of dealing with, or expressing, the simple emotion of anger. I think **the issue Paul wants to address has to do with, "What do I do with the angry feelings I experience?"** Let's take a closer look at some of these words:

(1.) **"bitterness"** -- the Greek word, *pikria*, comes from a root word meaning "to cut, to prick", referring literally to a cutting, sharp, pointed, keen, pungent experience to the taste or smell, ...a decidedly unpleasant, irritating and repugnant experience (Jas. 3:11; Rev. 8:11; used in the LXX for "bitter herbs" in Ex. 12:8; Num. 9:11). **Metaphorically, it is used to describe an equally distasteful, unpleasant attitude or emotional state** (Jas. 3:14; Heb. 12:15; Acts 8:23; Rom. 3:13,14; Matt. 26:75; Col. 3:19). We must draw a further distinction between *life experiences* that "taste bitter", (i.e., they are pointedly pungent, repugnant painful events that happen "to us", and we *experience* that revolting bitter flavor of that pain), versus a *person* who has become bitter. **A person who has become bitter is generally nursing their sense of anger, resentment, or outrage at being unfairly treated.** Instead of *processing* their painful, bitter experiences, they continue to *hold on to* them, ...*reliving* them and *rehearsing* their outrage and resentment, ...until the flavor of *their own* attitude, speech, and behavior is full of bitterness. **They themselves become rank, noxious, or poisonous to others. People will either be repelled by them,** and quickly turn away from them or avoid them (which they will notice, and which will serve to only build deeper hurts, feelings of rejection and resentment), ...**or people will identify with their bitter feelings and begin to be embittered themselves, ...spreading the poisonous "odor" to yet others** (Heb. 12:15).

(2.) **"wrath"** -- this is the Greek word, *thumos*, referring to a type of anger that is quickly burning, hot, and often issues in an outburst or explosion of rage. One's agitated inner feelings pour out in a *rush* of strong passion, much like the eruption of a volcano. Often, once vented, it quickly subsides, though not necessarily. Everywhere in the NT, when it is used of human emotion, it is presented negatively.

(3.) **"anger"** -- the Greek word, *orgē*, a settled, abiding intent of the mind to confront, resolve, set right, or take revenge upon someone who is perceived as invasive, hurtful, unjust, or unfair to oneself or others. It is more slow to rise than is *thumos*, but it is more lasting in nature. It tends to be more deliberate, and controlled, as well. For this reason, it *can be* more productive toward bringing about a good result, though *it is not above selfishness*, either. This is the same kind of anger that Paul commanded the Ephesians to employ in vs. 26.

(4.) **"clamor"** -- the word *kraugē* in NT Greek is an onomatopoeic word, said to imitate the cry of a raven. It was used for a variety of loud verbal outcries, from wails of lamentation (Rev. 21:4), to cries for help (e.g., Heb. 5:7), to a proclamation (Matt. 9:27; 25:6), to a cry of fright (Matt. 14:26). Here, **in this context, it probably refers to angry shouting, or raising voices in an argument.**

(5.) **"slander"** -- the Greek word, *blasphēmia*, from which we derive the English word, "blasphemy", comes from the Greek, *blapto* (to injure or harm) and *phēmē* (speech), . **It literally means "injurious speech", referring to any damaging, shaming, contemptuous speech toward another. To call people names, to**

"downgrade" them, to verbally abuse them in any way, is what this word is describing. It can be done *to* the person directly (as in verbal abuse), or *about* the person to others (i.e., slander or defamation of character).

(6.) "**malice**" -- the Greek word is *kakia*, and it is related to *kakos*, a very broad word for evil. Generally the opposite of excellence and virtue, **it refers to what is useless, inadvisable, injurious, destructive, and mischievous**. It refers more to the inner character, or nature of the person than to the outward actions or results. *Kakia* generally refers more to ill-will, hateful feelings, and **the inner desire to injure or "get back" at someone**.

So, what is Paul really teaching here? The verb in this sentence, "let [it] be put away from you", is a passive imperative, the action directed more toward the *emotions*, and only secondarily toward *us*. Actually, the verb means "to lift, carry, remove, take up". It is followed by the prepositional phrase "away from y'all". **What the apostle is telling us is to permit or allow these negative emotions and attitudes to be lifted away from us. The opposite of "let [it] be taken away" would be to not allow it to be removed, i.e., by holding onto it, or resisting, in some fashion.** Interesting. *Why* would we hold onto such things? Remember the context. This entire section is the *application* of what Paul had developed in vs. 17-24, concerning *learning to put off* old strategies of living that we formerly employed when we lived as "practical atheists", and *learning to put on* an entirely *new identity*, a new life dynamic *that includes God*, ...one that requires that we renew our perception of reality and discover how to operate in this world by very different principles. This verse is more of the application of that truth. **Why do we hold on to such negative, pain-filled emotion? Because it is what we know how to do. Because we have not learned how to live differently.** Often we hold on to anger because we "*want to*". It gives us a feeling of power, emotional release or self-justification. This is the *payoff* our sinful flesh gets, but it is not of God. In the end, *it costs us more than it truly benefits*. **We have a choice: Are we going to put off the old, in order to put on love, ...or will we continue in our old sinful ways?**

Note that the word, "malice" is part of a prepositional phrase, which helps to tie all of this together. The phrase, "**...along with all malice**", sounds like Paul just added one more negative attitude to the list of emotions and dispositions in the verse. The Greek preposition, *sun*, literally means "together with", and the word translated as "malice" means the *evil inner character*, ...the hostile desire to injure those who have offended or hurt us. **What Paul is teaching is that we can allow these negative emotions to be taken away from us together with all inner evil, i.e., in the application of "new-creation living" as we walk by the Spirit.** Put off the old person, with its former practices *and attitudes*, and put on the new person, a person with a different, good inner character.

Now, we tend to hear this as, "Stop feeling those negative emotions!" In reality, however, the way Paul is writing is assuming that we will experience them. How can we allow them *to be taken away*, if they do not *exist* in our experience in the first place? **Our emotions are not voluntary. They are automatic responses to the appearance of the world around us, usually based upon our past experiences.** In other words, our past experiences often have set us up to respond to certain *triggers*, things in the present that "look like" or "feel like" things that happened to us in the past. These "trigger events" will cause an emotional reaction to surface. It will come up automatically, ...we do not *choose* to feel it. This is important to understand. **To feel strong emotional feelings does not mean that we are not spiritual, or that we are being disobedient in any way. It is like any other temptation that is presented to us. We do not choose it, but we must deal with it!** What Paul says we ought to do is allow these emotions to be taken away *together with all the other "old man stuff"* that we set aside in order to walk in our new identity. It is interesting to see that **he did not simply say, "Put those emotions aside!" In reality, we simply cannot do that. We must process them. We must address them.** To will ourselves to ignore them, is like willing yourself to not feel that a stove is hot. It is not possible, or at least not healthy. The emotions are there to tell us something. They are there to warn us, to bring to our attention something that is hurting, or potentially a problem, that must be dealt with.

How do we do this? By reorienting our perspective to include God, our loving Father Who cares for us, and will comfort us, ...Who has promised to work all things [even the painful, abusive, and unfair things] together for good, ...Who will vindicate us and bring about justice, and will ultimately wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). **When we let Him be in charge, when we let Him be our help, our emotions will automatically begin to change, because our perception of reality is different.**

Two other observations: (1.) The verb tense indicates a point-of-time action. This doesn't mean it will all be *settled* in a moment. What it means is that **we must choose to reorient and process this emotion "at the moment, in the moment, and for the moment"**. We can't choose *now* for tomorrow. It *may* come up again, and we will have to deal with it *again*. **(2.) Even the proper anger, *orgē*, mentioned in vs. 26, is not to be "lived with"**. We are to *deal with what it is pointing out to us* (i.e., the offense or injustice), and then "*let it be taken away*", so we can *move on* in the joy of the Lord.