



"The happiness of a man in this life does not consist in the absence but in the mastery of his passions."

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

**15-Mar-13**

## **Hidden Anger (Part Three)**

Secular sociologists and psychologists have done extensive research and observation on most human behaviors, and anger in its various forms is no exception. During World War II, military psychologists first used the term "passive-aggressive" to denote the behavior of soldiers who displayed passive resistance and reluctant compliance to orders. While "passive-aggressive" may sound like a person who switches between extremes—first passive, then aggressive—it actually describes one who is aggressive but in a passive, hidden, subtle way.

According to the findings of these scientists, such aggression—anger, wrath, malice, hatred—may manifest in "striking out" at others in ways that would not normally be considered violent. In their definition, passive aggression can include behaviors such as verbal ambiguity or mixed messages; avoiding responsibility; blaming others; chronic lateness and forgetfulness in order to avoid an obligation; complaining and general negativity; intentional inefficiency; avoiding verbal or emotional intimacy; not trusting others; manipulation and control of others; superficial submissiveness; back-handed compliments; fault-finding as a defense against getting too close; withholding information; showing displeasure by not conforming to

expectations or standards; focusing discontentment on authority figures (employer, parent, teacher, even a spouse who has taken on the role of a parent); envy and resentment of peers who succeed or are viewed positively by authority figures; obstructing or sabotaging the plans of others; sullenness or sulking; and procrastination when assigned a task that is disliked.

At the root of these behaviors is unresolved anger, frequently from childhood and adolescence. Researchers have found that individuals exhibiting passive-aggressive traits often began doing so as a result of a "power struggle" with a parent. When that primary relationship is dysfunctional, the child of a harsh or intractable parent finds other ways of "expressing" himself—ways to "even the score" without doing anything that really crosses the line. If these patterns of subtly exhibiting anger become ingrained, they carry through into adult relationships and occupations. They become the "normal" way of dealing with things that make the person feel uncomfortable or if "unreasonable" expectations are put upon him.

Latent anger becomes the lens through which the individual sees [the world](#), and passive-aggressive behavior becomes second nature. Thus Paul twice specifically counsels fathers "not [to] provoke your children to wrath" ( [Ephesians 6:4](#); [Colossians 3:21](#)). As we noted, wrath can be open and obvious or subtle and hidden, and it can acquire targets unrelated to the source.

Anger, malice, hatred, and wrath are habits. They are learned, and they are practiced. But by the same token, they can be broken and replaced with responses that are appropriate and godly. [Jesus Christ](#) came to fulfill the prophecy in [Isaiah 61:1](#), which includes "healing the brokenhearted" (see [Luke 4:18](#)). That healing, if we are willing, includes emotional wounds—"broken hearts"—as well as physical ailments.

When we become aware of areas where our hearts are "broken"—areas where they have sustained injury, or where we can see they do not work as God's heart does—it is appropriate to take this before [God](#), acknowledge the brokenness, and ask for His healing. Sometimes the healing is instant, and other times it is a process that can take a long time.

[Psalm 37:7-9](#) contains some counsel regarding anger:

Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; *do not fret* because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. *Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret—it only causes harm.* For evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the LORD, they shall inherit the earth. (Emphasis ours.)

These admonitions can be broadly grouped into two categories. On the one hand, we are instructed to let go of the anger, and on the other, we are told to wait on God. Both of these elements are vital—to be effective, they must be exercised together.

In this psalm, David counsels us not to worry about people who get us worked up, advising, "Do not allow them to get your ire up." "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath," he writes. If a command like this is given, it is a sure sign that it can be accomplished—especially if we have been given God's Spirit. However, for the command to be carried out, it must be accompanied by the rest of the advice the psalmist gives, advice that centers on God's sovereignty and submitting to His control over us rather than continuing a power struggle that may have begun early in our lives. If we think we are—or should be—the one in control, we are likely going to be upset about what everyone else is doing and about whether justice is being served as we think it should be.

Nevertheless, David says, put your mind at ease. God is on His throne. The evildoers will be taken care of, and the righteous will be rewarded—though it might take a lot of patient endurance before it is all resolved. Yet, the fact that God is overseeing His physical and spiritual creation gives us the freedom to let go of the indignation, resentment, impatience, and antagonism that blossoms into anger, wrath, malice, and hatred.

Verse 9 says that those who wait on the Lord will inherit the earth, indicating that they are also [meek](#) (see [Matthew 5:5](#)). This contemplation of eternity—an everlasting inheritance—is the flipside of those practicing the [works of the flesh](#) (including ungodly anger in its various forms), who "will not inherit the [Kingdom of God](#)" ([Galatians 5:21](#)). Unrighteous anger, no matter how well it is hidden away, will always destroy relationships, and we should

never forget that the essence of eternal life is our *relationship* with the Father and the Son ([John 17:3](#)). That relationship, though, does not exist in a vacuum; our relationships with others reflect the quality of our relationship with God (see [I John 2:9](#); [3:15](#); [4:20](#)). Those who meekly wait on God, rather than stoking the coals of anger within, will be given eternal life.

- David C. Grabbe

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

God directs His laws at individuals rather than groups. Character change is an individual matter rather than a communal matter. The group will not change until each is converted individually. Likewise, we cannot expect to have peace on a grand scale until we as individuals make peace with our closest neighbor. Without loving our brother it is impossible to transform into the image of God. When we show love for our neighbor, we reciprocate God's love for us. We cannot expect unity in the greater church of God until we have unity among our own family members, strengthening spousal as well as parent- child relationships. As we strengthen the joints, we strengthen the whole body.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The Fruit of the Spirit: Peace](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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