

The Passion of Anger

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Orthodox Christians normally view passions as negative. There is, of course, culturally common uses of the term that might be more innocent. For example, the frequent advice to follow your passions need not be an exhortation to follow your gluttony, your lust or your talkativeness, but simply to do what you care deeply about; it is a separate question altogether whether you care about the right things. As a technical term describing harmful aspects of our spiritual life, however, a passion is “an appetite or impulse such as anger, desire or jealousy, *that violently dominates the soul*” (*Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 363; emphasis added). To put it simply, passions are desires that control us instead of us controlling them. I eat the chocolate cake because I cannot control my desire for it. Passions enslave us, leaving us with feelings of frustration and hopelessness about experiencing genuine inner transformation toward a peace that the world cannot give and a joy the world cannot take away.

Among the particularly pernicious passions is anger. We describe an angry person as having a “short fuse.” We ask about a person on a raging tirade, “What triggered him?” This is the imagery of violence: a bomb about to explode, a gun that has gone off. The damage is of course inflicted on the recipient of the ill-tempered behavior, but the Church fathers often draw our attention to the destruction that anger does to one’s own soul.

If it is true that the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as He is said to be and as, indeed, He is, and if anger is disturbance of the heart, as it really is and as it is said to be, then there is no greater obstacle to the presence of the Spirit in us than anger. (St. John of Sinai, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 8)

It behooves the athlete of Christ, who is contending lawfully, to root out the movements of wrath. The perfect medicine for this disease is that we realize, first, that in no way are we permitted to get angry, whether for an unjust or a just cause, knowing that we shall at once lose the light of discretion ... and then, that the purity of our mind will soon be driven out and that it can never become a temple of the Holy Spirit as long as the spirit of wrath dwells in us. (St. John Cassian, *Institutes*, VIII.22)

Anger rots its vessel, these fathers are telling us, making it unfit to be its Creator’s dwelling. So let us call it “poisonous anger” since it destroys its subject as well as its target.

With these common reflections in mind, it will seem surprising, maybe even shocking, to hear the opening saying from St. Isaiah the Solitary (+489):

There is among the passions an anger of the intellect (*nous*), and this anger is in accordance with nature. *Without anger a man cannot attain purity*: he has to feel angry at all that is sown in him by the enemy. (St. Isaiah, #1 in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 22; emphasis added)

St. Isaiah directs our attention to a “purifying anger,” one which is directed not at other people, or even at oneself or God, but at things inside us, “seeds sown by the enemy,” that do not belong in us. Foreign invaders lodge themselves in our souls polluting the persons that God created us to be. Such “seeds” might include our inclinations to laziness or envy, vainglory or possessiveness. Like poisonous anger, purifying anger harms its target, but unlike its negative counterpart it does not damage its source; instead, it purifies us precisely by eradicating our soul-destroying passions.

The contrast between being angry at a person (others, ourselves, or God) and the foreign invaders that reside in us is pointedly expressed by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). Anytime we are battling against “flesh and blood,” against fellow humans, we have misidentified the enemy. If we are angry at a spouse, a child, a parent, a parishioner, a priest, a co-worker or boss, or even at ourselves, we are misdirecting our anger. Instead, purifying anger should be directed toward our own sins and the temptations, desires, and passions that give rise to them.

Purifying anger, St. Isaiah teaches, is “in accordance with nature.” By this he means in accordance with our *created* nature. We often refer to human nature to mean our *fallen* nature (see, e.g., Eph 2:3), while at other times to mean our *created* nature (see, e.g., Rom 1:26; 2:14). Poisonous anger is in accordance with our fallen nature; it is among the foreign invaders, sown by the enemy, that needs to be eradicated from our soul. How? By directing our purifying anger at it. St. Isaiah frequently reinforces the need for this practice. “If your heart comes to feel a natural hatred for sin, it has defeated the causes of sin and freed itself from them” (#6, in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 23). And again: “Examine yourself daily in the sight of God, and discover which of the passions is in your heart. Cast it out, and so escape His judgment” (#20, in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 26).

The difference between anger according to our created nature and anger according to our fallen nature is further clarified by noticing that they are associated with different faculties of the soul. Purifying anger arises in the *nous*, the place of unmediated communion with God, and is charged with defending our genuine, divinely created, self and our intimate communion with God. Anything that hinders or distracts from that communion should be cast away by purifying anger.

The only things that can separate us from this communion are our own sins; no person and no event can destroy our communion with God; only we can--by sin.

Poisonous anger, on the other hand, arises in the *thymos*, the “spirited” or “incensive” part of the soul. It arises in us to protect our ego, an imaginary “self,” constructed in light of how we want others to view us. When we feel attacked, anger is the *fallen* natural response to protect our ego. Sometimes we become angry when we do not receive what we want. I want that last cookie on the tray but the person in front of me is taking it. I want to be at Church on time, but the kids are not cooperating. I want you to agree with my opinion but you obstinately will not. When we do not receive what we want, we are tempted to feel slighted, unimportant, imposed upon, disrespected; we may not consciously think of these situations as attacks, but our irritated responses indicate that we are indeed defending our fabricated “self”. In protecting our ego, however, we are polluting our *nous*, diverting it from communion with God.

With St. Isaiah’s teaching as background, we are in a position to understand St. Paul’s admonition: “Be angry and do not sin” (Eph 4:26; Ps 4:4). Purifying anger, in accordance with our created nature, is the God-given energy to resist the temptation to sin, and even to expel those impurities of the soul that allow temptations to grab a hold of us. How do we access this God-given energy? How do we redirect and even transform that poisonous anger into purifying anger? “Whatever is not of faith,” St Paul says, “is sin” (Rom 14:23). To be angry and not sin is to be forcefully intolerant of any inner state that diverts us from faith in Christ, from reliance on Him. It is for this reason that St. Isaiah continues his instruction by saying, “He who wishes to acquire the anger that is in accordance with nature must *uproot all self-will*, until he establishes within himself the state natural to the intellect (*nous*)” (#1, in *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 22; emphasis added). Cultivating purifying anger is not something we do by our own strength or effort, but rather it is divinely infused in us as we relinquish our self-will in favor of reliance on God--as we gradually learn to deny ourself, take up our cross daily, and follow Christ (Lk 9:23).

Finally, a caution: In discussions about the dangers of judging others, we often hear the advice: Hate the sin; love the sinner. This is *not* what St. Isaiah is teaching us. He is not saying to hate *other* people’s sins, but our own. We are called to participate with God’s grace in the purification of our own lives, not to clean up other people’s lives. Our hatred of other’s sins (as we perceive them) is simply thinly-veiled judgment. Let us work on removing the logs in our own eyes by cultivating purifying anger in place of searching for a speck in our brother’s eye.

