

What Made Jesus Mad

Mark 1:40-45

Some Christians are offended by the idea that Jesus occasionally became angry. At certain preaching conferences you can hear speaker after speaker get the expected chorus of “Amen’s” when he loudly and forcefully affirms Jesus’ virgin birth, sinless life, and vicarious sacrifice. Most of the pictures we paint of Jesus in our Bible studies show him as gentle and easy-going, always in control of himself and situations. It’s easy for us to forget that Jesus was really a human being with all the feelings and emotions that men and women experience.

We often say that you can’t keep doing the same old things and expect a different result. I have the notion that most Christians read or hear the gospel stories in the same old way and continue to see Jesus as they have always seen him. They fail to see the wonder of Jesus as a real, live human being.

The gospels are actually pretty candid. They show Jesus expressing a range of emotions. Jesus loved weddings and celebrations. He liked to have a good time; he had a wry sense of humor. You recall that he was criticized for partying with tax-collectors and prostitutes. Jesus was hurt when the crowds began to fall away. In the garden he openly stated his fear of what was coming. On the cross he cried out in loneliness and pain. And often in his interaction with persons and with the religious establishment he became downright mad.

There is the vivid account of Jesus in the temple when he simply “lost it”; he got so angry that he drove the buyers and sellers out with a whip. He became angry with the Pharisees in the synagogue when they opposed him for healing the man with the shriveled hand on the Sabbath. He was angry with the disciples for their concern for positions of honor in the kingdom. Jesus was more than a little piqued with the people of Nazareth for failing to recognize the work of God among them. Once he even cursed a fig tree because it had no fruit, even when

it was not the season for figs. Jesus got upset many times, and the gospel writers shared those stories with us.

What interests me about these accounts is the pattern you discover when you put the stories together. What are the things or the situations that aroused the anger of Jesus? What did his anger motivate him to do? Are we justified in getting angry? If so, what should make us mad?

We are a little afraid of anger. And rightly so! Anger can be negative. Lose your “temper” and you will inflict terrible pain on another person. Lose your “cool” and you will hurt yourself. Misplaced anger and uncontrolled anger can be dangerous. We do well to count to ten or to do whatever is helpful when we feel ourselves becoming angry. “Be angry but sin not” is a useful Biblical maxim.

But anger can also be positive. Anger can push us to action. And some things ought to make us mad. In the 1960s and 70s I often heard a Charlotte pastor named Carlyle Marney at meetings and preaching conferences. Carlyle Marney was usually controversial and always interesting. One day, he said, a church member came to his office and said, “Dr. Marney, the other day I heard you use a profane expression, and I need to tell you that I’m shocked that you would take the Lord’s name in vain.” Marney asked the man to take a ride downtown with him. He took the church member to a slum area of Charlotte that was owned by a wealthy, religious, and influential man in the city. “You want to see ‘taking the Lord’s name in vain’?” Marney said, his anger beginning to rise. “This is what is meant by ‘taking the Lord’s name in vain.’ If you’re going to be shocked, get upset about something important.”

Jesus got angry about things that mattered. The story we read today illustrates that clearly. Jesus’ experience with the leper occurred early in his public ministry, according to Mark’s account. Somewhere close to the Sea of Galilee a leper approached Jesus and asked for healing. The writer of Mark was

more straightforward about Jesus' feelings and his words than translators and interpreters. This story reveals several things that made Jesus mad. It's an excellent study of his heart and mind.

Many versions of the New Testament read that when the man made his request, Jesus was "moved with pity" or "filled with compassion." The footnote says that the word used could mean "anger" and probably it does. Jesus became angry when he saw the man's condition. Later in the story there is the implication of anger in Jesus' "stern warning" that the man tell no one of his cure. Three things here made Jesus mad. Let's look at them very carefully.

First, Jesus became angry with the situation. The man, said by Mark to be a leper, came with the plea, "If you choose, you can make me clean." We know now that what was called "leprosy" in many Biblical stories could have been any one of a number of scaly skin diseases. That's beside the point. What is the point is that in that day anyone with a visible illness such as a skin disease was considered ritually unclean. A person with "leprosy" was a social and religious outcast. Josephus the historian wrote that lepers were treated as "dead men." They were expelled from their villages and barred from all walled towns. They went about crying, "Unclean, unclean!"

That made Jesus mad. To associate a person with an illness or with a stereotype or with any negative characteristic for Jesus was reason for anger. Thief, publican, sinner, leper—these were terms that others used. Jesus did not see characteristics; he saw persons with needs. Republican, Democrat, Muslim, Christian, Jew, illegal alien—maybe there are some ways of putting people into categories that ought to make us mad!

Second, Jesus got mad at the ideas about God that were suggested in the man's request and in the treatment he received from society. The comment, "If you choose, you can make me clean," is part of an ancient prayer formula. It

was felt that only God could “make clean” because only God controlled who became ill and who did not. We know that then (and tragically sometimes now) persons think that illness is punishment for sin, either one’s own or that of someone else. Jesus was deeply disturbed by that ridiculous notion.

I realize that it can be somewhat comforting for some persons to think that if God will just will it, an illness can be healed. What bothers me is the other side of that concept. Does God will the suffering? I have to say no! I think here and in many other places Jesus repudiated the idea that illness is punishment for sin. Jesus was a “spirit person.” Somehow he possessed spiritual insight and an understanding of the love of Gods that he tirelessly tried to communicate. He would have been angered by the notion that God blesses or curses arbitrarily.

Third, Jesus was mad about the ritual requirements that the man had to meet to get back into his family and into society. When Jesus “sternly warned” the man about keeping quiet concerning his cure, he was not upset with the man himself. He was angry with the system. It was required that a priest pronounce the man clean or healed of his malady. I think Jesus was more sarcastic than anything. The meaning is more along the lines of something like this: “Just do what they want you to do!”

Do you see the kind of things that made Jesus mad? He was angered by things that put people down, that robbed them of their personhood, that hindered their relationship with God, or that deprived them of opportunity.

And what did Jesus do with his anger? He acted positively. In this case, he received the man, he actually touched him (a violation of the law in itself), and he directly him to move on with his life. And Jesus showed his followers that anger can be helpful and productive!

I have long been influenced by first the teaching and then the writings of Professor Wayne Oates. Wayne Oates taught for many years at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. He grew up in a poor neighborhood in Greenville. His father abandoned the family. No one in his family had been well educated. He began life, he often said, with a sense of shame and inferiority. He spent his whole career working toward acceptability for himself and for others. At first he took the route of education. Academic success helped. He sensed a rise of self-esteem with an awareness of abilities and accomplishments. Then he went to Washington to serve as a Senate page. He learned how to get along with other people. He became a minister and a teacher, always seeking self-acceptance. In his autobiography entitled *The Struggle to Be Free*, Oates says that he finally found peace in the attitude of Jesus. "From then on," he wrote, "I felt it a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me, nor, at the same time, to think of any human being as superior to me. I work at this as my daily discipline; to walk humbly with God and comradely with people. For all of us are made in the image of God. All of us who were once 'no people' are now the 'people of God'." (p. 43.)

You and I tend to get angry over slights and hurts that mean so little. Or we put on a sanctimonious face and say that we should never get mad about anything. The truth is that there is much to be angry about—poverty, ignorance, prejudice, abuse, violence, indifference. When you look at the stories, you find that these are the things that made Jesus mad. Maybe there is such a thing as "righteous anger"!

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