

Angry Teens: Start with Your Own Heart



by Paul David Tripp

I sat with a single mom whose posture, demeanor, and manner communicated only discouragement, fear and exhaustion. She was in the grip of powerful emotions. She was living with a son who had become increasingly angry. This son was huge in stature, a very intimidating presence. She had tried everything she knew how to do and nothing seemed to help. Her son just kept getting angrier. She was exhausted and at the end of her rope.

I counseled with an angry father and his angry son. It was hard to determine who was the angrier of the two. The father could not look at his son without anger, almost hatred, creasing his face. He was unable to say anything kind, patient, or positive about his son. He was utterly cynical. His son sat rigid and silent, giving me a look that said: "I don't want to be here, and there's nothing you will be able to do, oh great counseling person, that will ever impress me or change me. So don't even try." (He was right!)

Another confused mom sat in my office. That week she had gotten new locks so she could lock herself in her bedroom every night as she went to bed because she was afraid of the violent intentions of her own son. How had she moved from that wonderful moment when this

precious life came into her home, to this place now, where her biggest fear was not out there in the world, but in her own home, with her own child? She was afraid every night that her own son would come into her room and end her life. It seemed impossible, irrational, to think that this could be her own child.

Three Faces of Anger

Anger in one of your own teenagers plays to all of your darkest fears. It is hard to admit that such an angry person lives in your home. It is hard to admit, if you are a youth leader, that you have an angry teen under your ministry. We struggle with reputation, with pride. We want to be esteemed and respected by others. We want to project a successful reputation and image. To admit that you have an angry teen in your care or under your supervision suggests that you are doing something wrong. It suggests that somehow you are inadequate, that you are a failure as a parent or leader. We look the other way and minimize or avoid something that must not be minimized or avoided.

A teen's anger takes a particular form. It is connected to particular issues. We face huge temptations as parents or as the authorities or pastors of children as we deal with angry young people. How can we think biblically about this problem? How can we intervene biblically?

When we look at a teen's anger, we must

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look at the three faces of anger: the upward face, the outward face, and the inward face.

The Upward Face of Anger

The first face of anger is an upward face. It says, "I am angry at God." We are always afraid when our children get to this point and make this statement in words or actions. Very often children in families of faith will not admit that this is where they actually are. They cannot believe that the problem has gotten to this point.

This anger at God might look like this: "I hate myself! This is the body I am going to have for the rest of my life. I hate myself! I hate what I look like! I hate the size of my ears! I hate the shape of my nose. I hate my bushy, messy hair." "I hate being short and paunchy." "I hate being skinny and wiry." "I hate being seen as nerdy by other kids." "I hate being a muscle head." "I hate the choices that God has made in my life."

Or maybe they say, "I am angry at my gifts. I want to be a better talker. I want to have more of a life-of-the-party personality. I want to be more intellectual. I want to be more quick-witted. I want to be funnier. I don't like who I am."

Maybe this teen's anger takes another form. "I don't like my situation. I don't like where I live. I don't like the economic condition of my family. I don't like my race. I don't like the fact that I was raised in a poor family and somehow that poverty will always affect my life." Or, "I am being raised in a very wealthy family. No one ever takes us seriously. They never see us as people. They always see us as money. I have lots of friends, but they don't care a twit about me. All they care about is my money."

"I struggle with who I am with my family. Why did God would make my dad a pastor?" "Why did God make my parents missionaries? Didn't He know what that would do to me? I didn't even know there was such as thing as Nikes until I was seventeen because I was off in some jungle someplace walking barefoot. I was glad I had pants let alone shoes."

"Why was I raised in the Midwest? The Midwest is so boring. Why couldn't I have been raised on the cool East Coast or the cool West Coast?" "Why was I raised on a farm?" "Why was I raised in such a big city? I am a nobody in my school."

"Why do I have such strict parents who always say 'No'?"

"I am mad at God."

Parents, pastors, leaders, teachers, please hear this. It that's what's going on with your teen, if that's what's going on in your youth group, you are right now more like that young person than unlike him. You have at one time or another questioned God's goodness and God's wisdom. You have questioned the choices He has made in your life. But right away, when your child expresses anger at God, you go into this denial mode. You don't want your child ever to express anger with God. You want to squash that. But if your child is, in fact, in a deep-personal debate with the goodness and wisdom of God, pushing the debate under the table will never help him. That is never the pathway to change. That will keep the props of your life going and your reputation going, but it will not help that young person. Upward anger is a very significant thing.

Huge numbers of teenagers are angry at God and at how He has arranged their world. This is significant. We are so afraid of this teen anger toward God that we do things that drive that anger underground instead of putting that anger on the table where it can be talked about, and where the help of the Lord Jesus Christ can reach it. As we push that anger underground, we create a dichotomy. We say, "Do you know what your problem is? Your problem is that you are fundamentally different than me. I don't ever struggle with this thing you struggle with. How could you ever question God?" But can you honestly say that you haven't ever questioned God or complained about your circumstances? I can't.

Three or four years ago, I went through something that has been personally unthinkable. It was not in my life plan. I was shocked at the questions that filled my head. Vertical questions. Questions for God and about God I thought I would never raise, that I thought I was incapable of having at this point in my walk with Him. *We are all like that.*

The Inward Face of Anger

The second face of this anger is inward anger that is directed towards the teen's community. This is the "I'm mad at you." Maybe the anger of this teenager is fundamentally

familial. Maybe it is anger at a dad, who in his zeal to provide for the family and to be committed to his career, doesn't seem to ever have any time for him. It seems like the only time he's present in his life is when he is barking orders at him or announcing punishments or acting as a jailer. Maybe he's mad at his mom and dad because, although they talk of God's love and grace, it appears to him their relationship is ungracious and unloving. There seems to be something different going on in the home than goes on out there. He is disappointed with his brothers and sisters because there doesn't seem to be any love. It's just intense competition. He thinks they are the favorites in the family. He is angry at the relational breakdown, the inconsistency, the hypocrisy, the failures, the weakness of his family. The people he once thought were his heroes are not his heroes anymore.

is the point guard who had the best single season shooting percentage ever?" I can remember the first time he asked me one of those obscure questions. I said, "I don't know." His eyes got big because he thought his dad knew everything. He thought he could ask me any question, and I'd be able to answer it. You know that stage doesn't last very long!

There is an inward familial aspect of anger. It is a combination of the gap between our confessional and functional theology. We are inconsistent. We fail. It is easier to dictate it than to do it. We say better than we do—all of us.

This is a natural progression in relationships. The closer you get to your hero, the more you understand this person is just another human being with normal shortcomings. The more a teenager grows up, the more he or she sees the world as it actually

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Can you relate to that? Did you ever look up to a friend? You are so thankful for the person being in your life, you so respect his walk with God, and then you get to know him? The closer you get, the more he becomes a normal person. You can accept normal. Then you get closer, and he begins to get abnormal. Then you think he is downright deformed. You are actually coming to know that real person. Yes, there are some noble things about him. But he is a real person. There is still sin in his life. He still struggles. There is still weakness and failure. Listen, parents, it is hard for your teenagers to get to know you. It is hard to face that moment when this person who you thought knew everything and had everything together becomes, in fact, a real weak and failing human being.

My son, Darnay, is in his third year of college as a sports broadcasting journalism major. He has always been interested in sports and sports statistics. When he was a little guy, he would read books on the statistics of the NBA. He would absorb amazing things. He would ask questions out of the blue. "Dad, who

is. They face disappointment with the people in their lives.

The Outward Face of Anger

Outward anger is all about life in a fallen world. Life in a fallen world is hard. Upward anger says, "I am mad at God." Inward anger says, "I am mad at you." Outward anger says, "I am mad at the world."

Going to the average American high school is a hardship. It is an aggressive, competitive, abusive, seductive environment. Our children deal with tremendous mistreatment, tremendous anxiety. You can be repudiated for wearing the wrong sneakers. It doesn't take anything more than that. You can be an outcast because you happen to mention that you like a piece of music that isn't cool. Life in a fallen world is hard. It doesn't work the way it is meant to work. A teen faces dangers and temptations and hardships. There is huge disloyalty in relationships at this age. There is huge materialism, horrible sins of the tongue, things that teenagers say about one another that are terrible to face and deal with. Your teen

builds up anger against the world.

But there is something right about your teen's anger. Let's admit it. God's ways are not our ways. It is confusing to understand the will and way of the Lord. Our families are as much places of failure as they are places of love and joy and peace and hope because God is not done with us. We do live in a broken world where bad things do happen. Things happen that are hurtful and disappointing. But there is also something terribly wrong and terribly dangerous about anger in teenagers because sin can make that otherwise good thing a very destructive bad thing.

A Biblical Response to Teen Anger

There are no three instant steps to resolving the anger of a teenager. There are no seven pathways to familial peace. There is no moment of intervention that will break it forever. There are no secret techniques that, if you could just hook into them, you would have this baby licked! But there are some godly approaches that can help.

Be Humble: Admit Your Helplessness

Start with a willingness to be humble. Be willing to confess what you are facing because you need resources beyond the resources that you have within yourself to deal with this young person. Whether you are a family member or a person in ministry, don't build the temptation to round the corners of the story, to make the person look better than he actually is. To be suddenly dishonest as people ask you questions, to cover the struggle of the person, doesn't help you, him, or the person you are talking to. Be honest. Admit your helplessness in the face of this anger. What does this mean?

First of all, anger is an issue of the heart. You will never control the heart of your teenager. You cannot create the change that needs to take place. I am not saying you can't do anything. But the change that needs to take place is a change you yourself cannot create within your own power.

Second, you cannot do by human force what only the grace of God can accomplish. If you could, by the force of your personality, by the strength of your logic, by the power of your threat turn the heart of a teenager, Jesus would not have had to come. The cross argues against

that. The cross tells us there is something that must take place in us that can be done only by the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Teen anger demonstrates what you have always known to be true: we need to be rescued from us! What you see is the true condition of that child, the deep desperateness of his need, finally coming to full expression and full fruition. Now it is obvious to you, but it has always been the case. He has always been desperately needy. He has always been out of your control in that way. It has now come to expression and fruition. The game has not changed. This is the game! It has always been the game. That is why it is hard. Most of us have lived for years with the delusion that we have more power than we actually have. We don't like to face the fact that we have never had that power. It seems that, right now, our teenager's neediness is on the table, but it has always been there!

Third, the law cannot accomplish what demands grace. The tendency in the face of the desperateness and dangerousness of the teenager's struggle is to crank up the law. Think about this. If rules and regulations had that kind of efficacy, you would not be in this situation in the first place. You have always been dealing with rules. You have always been dealing with regulations. You tried to be faithful. But if those rules and regulations and requirements had the power to turn the heart, the heart would have already been turned. Should you let go of all rules and regulations? Of course not. But don't believe those rules will do something they were never intended to do. The fact that you are now dealing with this level of anger demonstrates that those rules don't have the ability to do that.

Fourth, fight with the right weapons. Second Corinthians is Paul's most autobiographical piece of writing, and in several places he explains or defends his ministry. What he says has importance for all of our ministries and relationships with one another.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of

God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete. (2 Cor. 10:3ff)

Strongholds. Pretenses. Lies. Paul says we must understand the battle we are in. It is a battle with strongholds. What is a stronghold? A stronghold is a fortified city, well built and well defended. These strongholds do not have a physical location. They exist in the heart. When you deal with teen anger, you are dealing with fortified cities of the heart, well built and defended. In fact, this very practical passage tells us how these strongholds are defended by arguments and pretensions—plausible lies. If I told you that in my earlier days that I was a female Olympic gymnast, that would be a lie; and I hope it would lack plausibility. But if I stood outside this building with an expensive suit on and a nice leather briefcase and some architectural drawings and a bit of a structural vocabulary, I could fool you for awhile into thinking that I was a well-paid architect. That lie would have plausibility. There are similar strongholds of falsehood in the life of a teenager. The teenager defends those strongholds by plausible lies. He says things to himself; she says things to herself that have some reasonableness. But, in reality, this self-talk is full of distortion.

Someone says, “I have parents who are far from perfect.” Another says, “Life isn’t fair.” You can go on and on. Nobody is more influential in your teenager’s life than your own teenager because nobody talks to your teenager more than your own teenager does! Your teenager has a constant internal conversation going on. We could say the same thing about you. No one is more influential in your life than you are because nobody talks to you more than you talk to yourself. We defend ourselves or justify ourselves with this self-talk. We defend our system of pretenses, this system of plausible lies. A man who spends way too much time in his job because he gets his identity out of his work will say to himself, “God has called me to be a good provider to my family. If I do what is wrong, I have one or two choices. I confess the wrong and place myself, once again, under the justifying mercies of Christ, or I erect some

system of self-justification that makes that wrong acceptable to my conscience.”

Look at the argument even further. Paul says that these arguments and pretenses set themselves up against the knowledge of God. He is not talking about theological knowledge of God. He is talking about experiential knowledge of God. He is talking about a relationship with God. In anger, the teenager says things to himself a thousand times a day. He is in an incessant internal conversation that is literally building walls between him and a wonderful, helpful, hopeful life-changing relationship with God. That is *the* issue. It is our job as parents to find ways to break into that internal conversation, to intrude into that system of defenses, to penetrate the walls of the fortification. You cannot give yourself to human weapons.

But what weapons do we usually use with teenagers who mess up? Perhaps threats. “You do not even want to think about what I am going to do if you go there. It will be on the news.” Or manipulation. “You want that car? You can have that car. All you have to do is be respectful to your mom for three weeks, and that car can be yours.” Or avoidance. “We will talk about this later.”

That teenager who responds to threat and manipulation will be the most respectful human being you have ever met in your life until he gets what he wants. You buy him that car and ten minutes later he will be bad-mouthing his mother.

How about guilt? Mom will say to a teenager, “I remember when your father was a happy man. It was before we had children.” Wrong weapon. After the threat is gone, after the payoff and manipulation has happened, after the guilt is over, that stronghold is still there. It is powerfully supported by plausible lies. There has been no actual spiritual change and the spiritual dynamics of that angry teenager’s heart. He is absolutely unchanged. Threats, manipulations, guilt-trips may work for awhile, but they will never produce a lasting harvest because anger is an issue of the heart. In our helplessness we have to make sure we fight with the right weapons.

Examine Your Own Heart

You have to be willing to examine your

own heart. You have to be willing to visit your anger and fear in the face of your teenager's anger. Living with an angry teenager will make you angry and fearful. You will struggle with emotions that you would have thought at one time were impossible to feel against somebody who was your own flesh and blood.

How do you get at this? For example, ask yourself the question, "Why does the anger of this young person make me so angry?" What is my anger about? What does my anger reveal about the true treasures of my own heart?" Perhaps you are not angry because of his rebellion against God. Perhaps you are not angry at his outrageous behavior. Perhaps you are not angry because he is shockingly proud and thinks he knows more than anybody in the world. Perhaps you are angry that in all of those responses he trashes what you crave. You crave comfort and ease. You want a home that is a retreat, but this person has made your home a place of war. You crave reputation. You can't

with the best one. I will scrape my fork on the plate. EEEEEEEEE! That noise will drive him crazy!" Do you understand what this father has done? He has become so obsessed with respect that he has turned his home into a final exam of respect. He has now begun to personalize things that are not personal at all. Maybe the kid just has bad manners. Maybe that is not a personalized attempt to drive his dad crazy. It is very easy to personalize these things that teenagers do. I have personalized things that aren't personal. You have done that. You walk into the room after a long and tiring day house cleaning, grocery shopping, and cooking. You say, "Do you know what my day has been like? Do you have a clue?" Your child didn't think, "My mom is in the house. She has had a tough day. I will make it worse. Yeah. That's what I'll do. I'll watch her brain come out of her ears and drip on her shoulders. Yeah." No. Your teenager is solely engrossed in what he or she has done all day. They have not had one thought about what

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even go out in public without being mortified because of the way he or she is dressed. You must visit what is going on with your own anger.

One of the keys to being used by God to get at the heart of the teenager is to start with your own heart. If you are not doing that, you will be in the way of what God is doing rather than being a part of what God is doing. You have to be willing to visit your anger and fear and to examine your own heart.

Again, consider the case of anger. Four things happen when you don't visit your own anger. First, you personalize what is not personal. It becomes all about you. I once had a father in my office who, in a burst of his own anger said, "Do you want to know how much my son disrespects me? He scrapes his fork on the plate at supper." With that preamble, I was expecting something big, not something like scraping a dinner dish. Can you imagine a fifteen-year-old thinking this? "Of all the ways that I can disrespect my father, I have come up

you have done or not done. Don't take that personally. That is just the way it is.

Groucho Marx had a great response to a person who complained that he had not responded to a letter he had written. This person made this situation much more personal than it actually was. Marx wrote back and said, "Sorry I haven't written you. I have been so busy not writing other people I didn't have time to write you." Do you hear what he is saying? It is not personal. Don't take things so personally.

Second, if I personalize what is not personal, I will turn a moment of ministry into a moment of anger. Do you know why God reveals the struggle of your teenager to you? Do you know why you hear those angry words? Do you know why you see those angry actions? Because God wants you to be part of what He is doing in your teen's life. He is conscripting you for His service. It is not an accident that you hear those things. It is not an accident that you see those things. You hear and see them because

God wants you to. That is ministry to which God is calling you. It is hard ministry. It is self-sacrificing ministry, but that is what God calls you to.

Third, if I turn a moment of ministry into a moment of anger, then I become adversarial in my response. I come at the young person. It becomes a “you-against-me” approach. “How dare you do this to me? You don’t want to get into this with me. Don’t push me. You want to push me? Okay, Go on. Push me.” Again that kind of response is tempting and even natural. But it misses the point.

Finally, in my own anger I will settle for quick situational solutions that don’t, in fact, get at the heart. I will throw out a threat or punishment or I will take away a privilege. More often than not, my angry response is more of a punitive strike back than a well-thought out correction.

Personalize what is not personal, and a moment of ministry turns into a moment of anger. If I am adversarial in my response and quick to give a situational solution or punishment, I will not get at the teenager’s heart issue. As you examine your own heart, realize this. In every moment of teen anger you must look at your own heart first.

A Mercy Agenda

What is God’s mercy agenda? First of all, mercy means you expect to suffer. Mercy means that God is doing His work, and therefore I am willing to be stained by your anger. I am not going to reject you because of your poor behavior. I am not going to wrongly try to control you in ways that are not helpful. I am willing for my life to be affected by what is going on in you because I want to get beyond fighting with the wrong kinds of weapons. I want to fight with the right kinds of weapons. I know that fight is not going to be a single event. It is going to be a process; it will take time.

Second, James describes mercy very clearly. Mercy means having a willingness to live with the poor. Scripture talks about more than economic poverty; it talks about spiritual poverty. Am I am willing to live with a person I don’t like very much? Am I willing to live with the person who offends me? Am I willing to be near someone who is a bit chaotic and a bit

messy and unpredictable? Yes. I am not going to walk away from your anger even if it brings chaos into my life.

Third, mercy means resisting favoritism. James talks about the rich man who comes into the assembly and gets special treatment right away because of his station in life. That happens in families, too. It is very easy to move toward the child who is doing well and to move away in distance and love and affection and communication from the child who is struggling. But mercy means persevering through hardship. Change is hard. Change is time-consuming. Change takes effort. Mercy means having a willingness to move out of a personal happiness agenda. I am willing to be uncomfortable on Tuesday night because we need to talk. I know you are going to be resistant. I know it is going to be hard and potentially hurtful, but I am willing to do that because that hardship is the hardship of grace. I want to break into your internal conversation. We are not going to scream and yell. But I know it will not be easy. Often, parents of angry, troubled teenagers simply quit talking to them. Talking to them is so hard and hurtful. It is easier to have meaningless, casual conversation and avoid the deeper, harder conversations about heart issues.

Mercy means having a commitment to forgive... and forgive again. Mercy means overlooking minor offenses. Don’t make everything an issue. Some things must be non-issues and overlooked; you can’t camp on everything. What are you after? You are after strongholds. You are after that fortified city of the heart. You are after those plausible lies. You can’t make an issue out of everything.

Mercy never demands compromising for what is right. Mercy is a way of getting at what is right. Mercy is how you go after what is right. It is not in the way of what is right. A commitment to mercy will reveal the true treasures of your own heart because your struggle with giving mercy reveals what is really important to you.

Finally, mercy always requires mercy. You need grace to give grace. You need God’s love to offer love. You need His help to be a helper. So mercy will always drive you to the cross.

The Intentions of Mercy

Mercy has four intentions. The first

intention is firm commitments. You have to know what is important. You have to know where the issues lie. You have to be committed to go after them, but not in a negative, threatening way. You have to understand your agenda. You have to step back and say, "Here are the important issues in this person's life, and I want to go after them in a way that is productive. I have to break into that internal conversation."

Second, firm commitments need to be spoken in kind words. Don't allow yourself to get into a war of words with your teenager. The minute you respond in foolish ways in the face of your teenager's foolishness, you strengthen those plausible lies. A teenager says, "You have nothing happening yourself. Why would I listen to you?" The employment of those commitments is kind words.

to verbalize the things that are at the heart of that struggle with anger. It means lots of talking, lots of time, lots of investment in that relationship.

The second type of relationship is the corrective relationship. This is with the teen who is a little further down the road, a little less willing to listen. You want to correct this course or direction that has already gone on too far. One way to do this is to let the teen take the natural consequences for his actions. This is not being punitive; it is godly discipline. You want the child to begin to understand that there are natural consequences that flow from particular behaviors. It is very biblical. God is not mocked. What a man sows he reaps. At times we wrongly protect our children from the consequences of their behaviors. Some parents may be so afraid of a rebellious teenager failing high school that

God has given you the body of Christ because you need resources bigger than your family in order to live in the middle of your family.

Third, enhance those commitments with loving actions. Act with love, not with unbridled passion. Don't act out of tit for tat or out of vengeance. Make sure your actions are decisive but loving.

Fourth, intentionally do everything you can to incarnate the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ so that your response to the child will be, by God's grace, unassailable—that you would actually model the thing you would want him to embrace for himself.

The Strategy of Mercy

The right intentions orient you to become strategic in your responses. There are three types of relationships with angry teens. The first type of relationship with an angry teen is a preventative relationship. This is with the teenager in whom you are just beginning to see the anger begin to grow; but he is still open, still available to relationship, still willing to listen. Your goal is to prevent him from going where that anger will take him. That means spending lots of time with him. It means an agenda of warning, but lovingly done. It means you want to have a listening ear. You want him to be able

they virtually do their homework for them. That is not helpful. That actually blinds the heart.

The third type is the protective relationship. Your teenager is so angry and out of control that he needs to be protected from himself. You can't just talk anymore; you don't think you can prevent angry explosions and their consequences anymore. Your teen is now capable of doing things that could forever alter not only his life but yours, too. Maybe that means you find a good solid Christian home you would actually send your child to because you need resources that are bigger than your own. There are Christian ministries that are set up to do this kind of thing. You don't want to start there, but don't ignore this option. God has given you the body of Christ because you need resources bigger than your family in order to live in the middle of your family.

Remember that big, hulking angry kid I told you about earlier? It was very clear that his home was not going to be the place where change could take place for him. His home was becoming a place of such deep anger and violence that something terrible was about to

happen. We found help for this mom. The young man went into a very strict environment and over time, God began to get a hold of his heart. Later that big kid and his mom sat in my office. She was utterly unafraid. Only God can turn an angry heart.

Conclusion

God calls us to ask this question: “In my relationship with this angry person, what does it look like for me to play a part in what God would do in this kid’s heart, and not to get in the way of it?” Remember the gospel. God will never call you to a thing without giving you the wherewithal to do it. This is hard. My

experience, as I have talked with families, is that they end up testifying not only to the grace of God in the life of their teenager but the grace of God in their own lives. I have had parents again and again say to me, “I have been tremendously changed by this dark experience.” I have had parents say this to me. “I would never want to go through this again, but I am deeply thankful for what I got in the middle of it.” Remember, the wonderful counselor is working on everybody in every situation—even with angry teens and their families.