

What If You Can't?
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Genesis 4:1-12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

As Matt was preaching last week one of my favorite poems kept popping into my head.

It is Rudyard Kipling's wonderful poem IF.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,

And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

A preacher was quoting that poem from Kipling when a man in the back of the room jumped up and said: BUT WHAT IF YOU CAN'T

That is the challenge of life.

Matt was 100% right, we need to listen to each other, we need to demonstrate compassion to each other --- BUT WHAT IF YOU CAN'T!

What if you can't?

As I was heading to Michigan a couple of weeks ago, we were snarled in heavy traffic near South Bend. There wasn't any place to go, but the truck behind me felt like I wasn't moving fast enough, as soon I could I moved over I did, and as he passed me, he cut the truck over forcing me onto the shoulder.

Believe me --- At that moment I wasn't feeling any compassion

Anger welled up inside me

I am sure I said a few things that I probably shouldn't have

And running through my head was the memorable line from the movie
Network

"I am mad as Hell and not going to take it anymore!"

And I tried to safely get a picture of his license plate

Which I failed to do, which made me even madder!

The very first question in the Bible after the exit from the Garden of Eden is found in Genesis chapter 4. God asks Cain: "Why are you angry?"

I think most of us could be asked the same question.

We are becoming an increasingly angry society

I have gotten to the point where I cannot stand watching the news, because I get angry
There was a powerful article in the Indy Star a couple weeks ago about how dysfunctional social media has become.

I see many of your posts and interactions on FaceBook --- sometimes we just aren't very nice to each other.

Anger is quite dangerous if it is not handled in a healthy way, and it can become extremely destructive.

Some of us have experienced destroyed relationships, destroyed bodies, and even destroyed churches because of anger not being handled in healthy or helpful ways.

Anger can be expressed in many ways.

It isn't always expressed outwardly towards others.

Sometimes it's expressed inwardly and when that happens, internal anger can cause stress as well as depression and many other things including severe health problems.

Anger can throw us into an absolute funk and we don't have any idea what to do.

Anger is real

And like Howard Beale I often want to say: "I am mad as Hell, and I am not going to take this anymore!"

Because, sometimes I can't --- I can't show compassion, I can't be nice, I just can't!

Is that you?

Do you feel that sometimes?

What if I told you that there was another way?

Would you be willing to listen, or better yet take a chance that might change your life?

The answer just might be found in following the advice of Brant Hansen who in 2015 wrote a transformative book called, Unoffendable

The key question he tries to address is do we have a choice?

Do we **have** to experience anger?

As I read the book the answer seems to be yes and no.

I do think we can choose not to take offense --- not to become angry.

This choice, however, isn't made in isolation; the choice to be unoffendable is intertwined --- linked by our answers to a host of other questions.

To try to put this into simple terms let me ask a question; is the choice to run a marathon just one choice?

Well, yes and no.

To be sure, it's a choice, but it's not a choice made in isolation from other choices about diet, sleep, training, and rest.

You don't just wake up one morning and choose to run a marathon that day --- you choose to run a marathon by all the choices you make in the months leading up to it.

So many other things in life are the same way --- none of our choices are really made in isolation from everything else but are truly contingent upon other things.

It's the exposing of this interlocking nature of anger and offense that I found so helpful in Hansen's book.

Being unoffendable isn't a mere choice to grow "thick skin" (whatever that means --- or stop being a snowflake as people like to hurl at each other) --- but the holistic choice to pursue a life centered on Jesus.

BUT wait -- isn't there a place for RIGHTEOUS ANGER?

Aren't there times when we should be offended --- when we should be angry?

Hansen argues that righteous anger belongs to God and to God alone.

He repeatedly quotes from the bible to show how God wants us to get rid of our anger.

Ephesians 4:31 (NRSV)

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice

Colossians 3:8 (NRSV)

But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.

How anger is dangerous

James 1:20 (The Message)

God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger.

How silly anger ultimately is

Ecclesiastes 7:9 (The Message)

Don't be quick to fly off the handle.

Anger boomerangs. You can spot a fool by the lumps on his head.

And probably the most quoted verse in the bible on anger

Ephesians 4:26-27 (The Message)

Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge.

Which would seem to suggest that anger can be good, and many stop right there, but listen to the rest of the verse

And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.

And don't forget our passage this morning, as God asks Cain:

"Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Giving into anger can lead us down some dangerous and deadly paths . . .

And Hansen is quick to point out that anger is not listed as one of the fruits of the spirit!

In a post on his Blog, Hansen shares his encounters with what he called "Bible show interviewers":

Bible Show Interviewer: But the Bible says human anger can be a good thing and righteous.

Brant: Actually, it doesn't. (Cites multiple scriptures, including where we're told, point-blank, to get rid of all anger, that human anger is never righteous, etc.)

Interviewer: Oh, so... you're telling me I shouldn't harbor anger towards terrorists?

Brant: I'm just reading scriptures and stuff.

Interviewer: C'mon. You're telling me to get rid of all anger?

Brant: I'm just reading scriptures and stuff.

Interviewer: Are you NUTS?

Brant: Why yes. Yes I am. But I'm just reading scriptures and stuff.

He goes on:

It tends to become a "You can't tell me I can't stay angry towards this or that criminal!"-type discussion. I try to point out that Jesus levels the moral playing field, and we're murderers, too.

Yep. 2000 years later... and no one wants to hear that. Still doesn't go over well. The Gospel still liberates many, and scandalizes the rest.

The truth is, most of us are unwilling to let God be God and us to just be God's creation.

We want to be in control!

We want to let our anger determine who is right and who is wrong.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* wrote:

Jesus will not accept the common distinction between righteous indignation and unjustifiable anger. The disciple must be entirely innocent of anger, because anger is an offence against both God and his neighbor.

Dr Martin Luther King agreed when he wrote in his autobiography

This Monday I went home with a heavy heart. I was weighed down with a terrible sense of guilt, remembering that on two or three occasions I had allowed myself to become very angry and indignant. I had spoken hastily and resentfully. Yet I knew that this was no way to solve a problem. "You must not harbor anger," I admonished myself. "You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger."

He went on and explained how one can fight injustice without anger. He wrote:

We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know that you love them.

In other words, be motivated by love

love for victims
love for bystanders
love for enemies

I didn't say this would be easy

Let me ask you --- is your anger working?

Are you happier with your anger --- even your righteous anger?

Is our constant sniping at one another making the world a better place?

As I look around, I would suggest that our anger and indignation has gotten out of hand!

As CHRISTIANS, and I am speaking to followers of Jesus --- choosing to be unoffendable means choosing to be humble.

Hansen concludes his book:

Choosing to be unoffendable means choosing to be humble. Not only that, the practice teaches humility, once you've decided that you can't control other people; once you've reconciled yourself to the fact that the world, and its people, are broken; once you've realized your own moral failure before God; once you've abandoned the idea that your significance comes from anything other than God, you're growing in humility, and that's exactly where God wants us all.

It's contrary to seemingly everything in our culture, but the more we divest ourselves of ourselves, the better our lives get. Jesus told us as much. He said if we'd give up our lives, for his sake, we'd find real life.

When we surrender our perceived "rights," when we let go of our attempts to manipulate, we find --- surprise! --- joy.

But what if I can't!

Well, the truth is you can't

You cannot solve your anger problem on your own

But, if you let go and let God be in control, you can begin to allow yourself to be unoffendable.

If you do that you will grow in ways you never dreamed possible

And your life will be a heck of a lot happier as well!