Angry Jesus [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 14 March 2021 - 23:14



Read time: 17 minutes
One does not have to look far to find people who are angry. Whether they are angry about historical injustice, experiencing road rage, being indignant at what they perceive as poor customer service, venting on social media, or any of a myriad of other reasons, experiencing or perceiving anger is part of daily life.

Christians are not exempt from anger. Some get angry at culture: how the good mores of the past have been perverted, and the worship of God diminished. Others are angry because of culture: their political allegiance (perceived as being divinely ordained) makes them unforgiving enemies of their political rivals (alongside their secular political allies). And, of course, the “infighting” among Christians for which Christianity has developed somewhat of a reputation. But how does an angry attitude compare to the life of Jesus, the person whose example Christians are supposed to emulate?

Just about anything can and has been justified from the Bible. The Bible definitely has stories of Jesus being angry, such as when He overturned the money changers' tables in the Temple. Are examples such as these (barring whatever else the rest of the New Testament has to say about Christian conduct) enough to justify an angry attitude towards the world?

Let us examine the examples of Jesus being angry in the Bible, and see whether there are any patterns, and whether that can inform us of what our conduct should be.

Firstly, it needs to be said that it is not obvious to know when precisely Jesus was angry in the gospels and when not. For example, when Jesus says of His disciples that they are of “little faith” for misunderstanding Him and being worldly minded instead of Kingdom minded in Matthew 16:5–12, was He angry with them for their lack of understanding, or did He speak to them in a more gentle manner? Most people probably assume He would have spoken to them in a more gentle manner rather than being properly angry, because that is the image of the meek and mild Jesus as He is often portrayed. But the truth is that we simply do not know. The stories often record what Jesus said, not how He said it. Inferring anything about His attitude either way is an argument from silence: because the text does not say He was angry, and we interpret Him as not being angry, we conclude He must not have been angry. But that is not necessarily the case.

Jesus Expressing Anger in the Gospels

I only include examples of where it can be reasonably inferred that Jesus was angry. I therefore consider this to be a conservative list. But even with a more liberal reading of the gospels, I do not believe it would change the overall conclusion which we will reach.

It also needs to be said that “anger” is not necessarily the same as rage or fury. I would argue that from the gospels we do not have examples of Jesus acting irrationally (controlled by emotions) because of anger[1]. Instead, His words and actions remain measured. We see, for example, that before Jesus drives out the money changers from the Temple in Mark 11:15–17, He goes to the Temple the day before and “looked around at everything”. The act of driving out the money changers was most likely premeditated, and deliberately intended to be provocative and put attention on Jesus. More on that below.

Broadly speaking, I would categorise Jesus expressing anger towards five different audiences:

1. Spiritual evil
2. Nature
3. Secular authority
4. His disciples
5. Hypocrites

Audience	Event	Scripture
Spiritual evil	Jesus rebukes Satan	Matthew 4:10, Luke 4:8
	Jesus drives out a demon	Mark 1:21-26
Nature	Jesus rebukes the fever of Simon’s mother-in-law	Luke 4:38–39
	Jesus rebukes the storm[2]	Matthew 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41
	Jesus curses the fig tree	Matthew 21:18–19
Secular authority	Disregard for Herod	Luke 13:32
His Disciples	Jesus rebukes Boanerges	Luke 9:54–56
	Jesus frustrated at His disciples	Matthew 16:5–12
	Peter attempts to prevent Jesus’s purpose	Matthew 16:23, Mark 8:33
	Jesus is indignant because His disciples prevented the children coming to Him	Mark 10:13–16
	Jesus frustrated at disciples' pride	Matthew 17:14–20
	Peter cuts off a servant’s ear	Matthew 26:51–54, Luke 50–51

Audience	Event	Scripture
Hypocrites	Jesus drives out the moneylenders	John 2:14–16
	Woes on those who are rich, full, laugh, spoken well of	Luke 6:24–26
	Woe to unrepentant cities	Matthew 11:21, Luke 10:13
	Jesus calls the religious elite “hypocrites” for their indignation as His healing of a woman on a Sabbath	Luke 13:14–16
	Jesus denounced Pharisees as hypocrites	Matthew 15:7–9, Mark 7:1–15
	Woe to the one by whom temptation comes	Matthew 18:7–9, Luke 17:1
	Jesus cleanses the Temple	Matthew 21:12–15, Mark 11:15–17, Luke 19:45–46
	Woes to scribes and Pharisees	Matthew 23:13–36, Luke 11:42–52

The "hypocrites" category is so named because the audience was primarily the religious elite (Pharisees [2], scribes, and teachers of the Law of Moses), or Jews in general, who believed that by their very status of being God’s elect people, they were righteous. We know that Jesus primarily came to minister to the Jews (Matthew 15:24), so they would have been His target audience when He said these things.

This means that there is a missing audience from the list above: what about the non-Jews and non-religious or pagan people with whom Jesus interacted? What was His interaction like with them?

Jesus' Interaction with Non-Believers

Jesus grew up in Galilee, which at that time was known as “Galilee of the gentiles”, because of the many non-Jews who lived there. His hometown of Nazareth (which was very religious [3]) was roughly an hour’s walk from Sepphoris, which was a non-Jewish, Roman city. He would have had many interactions with non-Jews growing up. The gospel records some of His interactions with non-Jews. Sometimes He even deliberately travelled to areas which were non-Jewish. Let’s have a look at what interactions Jesus had with non-Jews were recorded in the gospels:

Samaritan woman	John 4:9
The faith of the Centurion	Matthew 8:5–13
Country of the Gadarenes	Matthew 8:28–34, Mark 5:1–20, Luke 8:27–39
Samaritans reject Jesus	Luke 9:54–56
Syrophonecian woman	Matthew 15:21–28, Mark 7:24–30, Luke 7:26–30
Samaritan leper	Luke 17:11–19
Pilate	Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 18

About half of the recorded interactions which Jesus had with non-Jews were negative or under

circumstances detrimental to Jesus:

1. The Gadarenes asked Jesus to leave their area.
2. The Samaritans did not allow Jesus and His followers to pass through their area.
3. Jesus was on trial before Pilate, who would ultimately condemn Him to death.

In none of these interactions is Jesus recorded as becoming angry. In fact, Jesus became angry at His disciples who were hostile towards the Samaritans. He also, during His trial, arguably showed more respect to Pilate than to the high priest (or, at least, the encounter was more amicable; John 18:19–24).

Discussion

For our purposes, we are not going to consider Jesus being angry at spiritual evils or nature. We are going to take for granted that it is proper to be antagonistic towards the spiritual forces trying to wreak havoc on God's good creation. As for Jesus being "angry at nature", that deserves a discussion on its own. In summary, Jesus was not angry at physical creation; instead, these events (the calming of the storm and the cursing of the fig tree) were illustrative lessons intended for the disciples to see and think upon, as opposed to an indication that nature itself is evil[3].

This leaves us three audience classifications to consider.

The event where Jesus called Herod Antipas a "fox" (Luke 13:31–22) is a difficult example to classify. It is unclear whether this was said in true anger, or simply dismissively. Herod Antipas could also fall into one of two other categories: that of the hypocrites, and that of the non-Jews. Herod Antipas's father (Herod the Great) was an Edomite, and his mother a Samaritan. That means that Herod Antipas was not an ethnic Jew. When John Hyrcanus conquered Idumea (Edom) during the Maccabean revolt for Jewish independence from the Seleucid Empire around 125 BC, the Idumeans (Edomites) were forced to convert to Judaism. From them came Herod the Great, and then his son, Herod Antipas, who ruled over Galilee. The religion of Herod Antipas, therefore, was technically Judaism, but whether any pious Jews in first century Palestine believed that he was sincere about his religion is doubtful. With his efforts to appease the Romans, and his background, he may, possibly, be considered a non-Jew, particularly with the Jewish mindset of the time. On the other hand, he also seemed to have tried to appease the Jews under his rule. He therefore had an understanding of, and a sensitivity to, the Jews and their religion[4]. So, depending on which perspective one takes, he was not one of the children of Israel to whom Jesus was sent, but he also knew enough about Judaism to ought to have known how to behave righteously, but did not, i.e. he was effectively a hypocrite. It is for this reason that I put him in a category of his own: he ought to have known how to be righteous before God, but nobody was probably surprised that he was not. He was a ruler, and said what was necessary to get by, but by no means ran a theocracy. He was at the same time hostile towards the Kingdom of God (having John the Baptist arrested and executed[5], seeking to kill Jesus[6], and approving His condemnation[7]), yet he also did not care enough about Jesus and His ministry to have Jesus arrested or otherwise interfere with Him. When John the Baptist was arrested, it was for personal criticism against him. Indeed, one of Jesus's patrons was Joanna, the wife of Chuzas, who was "Herod's steward" (Luke 8:3), so there was also a link to Jesus within Herod's court, but this did not seem to cause concern. Jesus likely did not pay Herod Antipas much thought, although He did not have a high opinion of him. The reason is that Antipas ought to have known how to be righteous, but instead he was antagonistic to the Kingdom of God. And so when Jesus referred to him, it was as to a hypocrite.

The final two audiences who received anger from Jesus were His own disciples, and the "hypocrites".

The former were so steeped in the cultural expectations of the day that it took a long time for their thinking about what the Kingdom of God to be reformed. They would have spent nearly every day with Jesus for three or four years. They went out on missions on which Jesus sent them. They saw His miracles and heard His teaching first hand—even His controversial teachings—and continued to place their trust in Him. Yet they battled to overcome their own pride, preconceptions, and spiritual blindness caused by sin and cultural expectations. Jesus loved His disciples, and became frustrated with their slow understanding. He chastised His disciples precisely for that reason and as part of the process of growing them into the ones who would continue His ministry on earth after His ascension.

The “hypocrites” are the Jews who rejected Jesus’s message about the Kingdom of God, particularly the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the Law. The religious elite, as well as the laymen, saw themselves as part of God’s chosen people. For that reason, they were (nearly) automatically righteous. Their good actions and obedience to the Law of Moses (and the traditions of the elders around the Law), made them even more righteous. Yet, time and again, Jesus called them out for their hypocrisy: how they lived the letter of the Law while neglecting the spirit of it. They appeared pious, but their hearts were full of pride and selfishness. They became experts in exploiting God’s Law for their own sinful, selfish and prideful gain. Through the examples which they set with their beliefs and their actions, they were leading God’s chosen people further away from God’s intention for His people and the glory of His Kingdom. While proclaiming to be leading people to God, the religious elite were precisely leading people away from God. What should have been good news for people was corrupted and even weaponised to corrupt even more people. This is a special category of people: not people who resist God from their sinful ignorance, but because they can profit from doing so while knowing they ought not to. It is therefore no wonder that the majority of recorded incidents of Jesus’s displays of anger (some clearly premeditated) are directed against this the hypocritical religious elite.

It should be noted that people in this group were still not beyond hope in Jesus’s view. While Jesus denounced their hypocrisy, He still welcomed those who were sincere about His message to repent and to return to God’s intention for His people. An example is Nicodemus (John 3:1–15, John 19:38–40). In fact, despite of the hostility sometimes displayed by Jesus towards them, some Pharisees did become Christians (Acts 15:5).

Conclusion

When I did this survey of Jesus displaying anger in the gospels, I have to admit at being surprised by how many times He did display anger. It is clear, though, that Jesus was calculated in displaying anger. He used it to get people’s attention and for effect. It was not a case of Him being ruled by emotions, losing His temper, or going on uncontrolled rants.

Jesus’s anger was also primarily reserved for people who should have acting on their knowledge of God’s will, but did not. These were people who had heard the Word of God and professed to be obedient followers of it—particularly those who were in leadership positions in the faith—but were still trapped by earthly thinking and desires. His intention with His anger was to correct them, not condemn them (although there was the warning that condemnation awaits them if they do not correct their thinking and behaviour).

If we take Jesus’s behaviour here on earth as an example of how Christians should live, then we can learn the following from Jesus’s displays of anger:

1. Righteous anger is permissible. Jesus was not angry about how He was treated by others, even when He was being condemned to death. Anger should not be rooted in pride and the self [4], but in the Kingdom of God.

2. It is right to be angry about evil, but we need to distinguish between evil and the agent. Jesus was angry at the demon, not the person who had the demon.

3. The majority of our anger should be reserved for blatant hypocrisy in the church. Mistakes should be forgiven. People who struggle with sin should be loved. We need to remember that we are dealing with sinners, even within the church. However, when someone exploits the church or the gospel for selfish gain, that should be strongly condemned.

4. When we rebuke someone, we do not condemn them. Our desire should, first and foremost, be to see that person repent and be saved. Our anger should be a warning of God's condemnation, not an act of judgement (which is reserved for God).

These points enforce the ancient Christians beliefs that God is slow to anger and abounding in love, and that Christians have a responsibility to forgive other people.

Instructions for Christian living and behaviour are also found in the other books of the New Testament. Reviewing them is beyond the scope of this article. Perhaps that can be a personal exercise for you, the reader, to see what the rest of it says about anger and temperament. I think you will find it agrees well with the above points.

- 1. For transparency, I would say that the closest Jesus comes to uncontrolled anger is when His disciples failed to drive out an evil spirit from a boy, and when we launches a tirade against the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. In the first instance, it was a matter of frustration with His disciples who were still very much worldly-minded while they ought to be Kingdom-minded at that point. In the second instance, it does not at all have to be the case that Jesus did not prepare to denounce the Pharisees and teachers of the Law beforehand. Matthew tells us that this event happened during the Passion Week, and this could have been another act which Jesus intended to deliberately be provocative.
- 2. The Greek word translated as "rebuke" is the same as is used when Jesus rebukes Boanerges, so He is at least being stern.
- 3. In the case of Jesus rebuking the fever of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, the fever (or, rather, whatever caused the fever) can be seen as a consequence of the fall, where humans became mortal and suffer death for their disobedience against God. This goes against the intention which God had for His creation. And so while sickness and death are punishments ordained by God, those things are also antithetical to God and will themselves be brought to an end after the end times. Even though the fever may have been purely natural, in a sense, sickness and death are unnatural [5], and akin to demonic, so it is appropriate for Jesus to have rebuke a fever.
- 4. Unlike, for example, Pilate, who was a pagan through-and-through, and often used whatever knowledge he did have to the Jews to antagonise them.
- 5. Matthew 14:1–12, Mark 6:14–29
- 6. Luke 13:31–33
- 7. Luke 23:8–12

Categories:

- Bible Study [6]

Tags:

- jesus [7]
- anger [8]
- gentiles [9]
- jews [10]
- herod antipas [11]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1229

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1229
[2] https://siyach.org/node/1061
[3] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/archaeology/jesus-home-town-nazareth-archaeological-discovery-research-a9470716.html
[4] https://siyach.org/node/1117
[5] https://siyach.org/node/1111
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/5
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/214
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/828
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/1018
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/1019
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/1020