

Control, Fear, and Anger

There are times when it's absolutely necessary to be in control, like when you're driving a car or doing something else with machinery or equipment of some kind. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, the need to control the other person is unhealthy and destructive.

The person who is into controlling others deprives himself or herself of all sorts of surprises. “Ah, that's the point,” says the controller. “I hate surprises.” Really? Like a surprise gift on your birthday? Like a good diagnosis when you were expecting a bad one? Like a compliment you weren't expecting? No, the controller only hates outcomes that aren't what the controller wants to see. That's a very limited and limiting way to live, when everything has to happen according to your plan.

The Bible never tells us to control others, but to control ourselves. Self-control is the final part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5. It's listed last because it keeps all the other parts together. Dealing with one's own emotions, needs, and desires is a full-time job. There's no time and energy left over for controlling others. We can influence, we can guide, we can inform, we can instruct, but we cannot and should not seek to control.

The desire for control is usually driven by fear: fear that things won't go as planned, fear of the other person. Faith and fear don't go together. I'm not talking about the fear of the Lord – the deep awe and respect we have for Almighty God – nor am I talking about the rational fear of things like excessive speed or unhealthy habits. I'm talking about the fear that events won't go the way I want or expect them to go.

Over and over again God's Word says, “Don't be afraid.” Freedom from fear produces freedom from the desire to control. “Don't be afraid.” Is that simple and clear enough?

When things don't go the controller's way, anger is almost always the response. Sometimes people try to justify themselves by saying, “I'm feeling righteous anger.” If you have to tell yourself that your anger is righteous, it's almost certainly not; it's your own personal anger. As Scripture says, the anger of man does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Righteous anger is clear-minded and reasonable, originating in the mind. The anger of man comes from the gut; you can feel it rising. It's emotion, not reason. It's not righteous. It's sinful.

Righteous anger is the constructive desire to set things right when God's good and gracious will is being violated. Righteous anger can be a powerful energy source for mission, when our anger toward Satan and his deadly lies – along with Christ-like love for people who are being deceived by Satan's lies – causes us to be bold and dynamic and creative in sharing and showing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Righteous anger is rightly directed toward sinful things going on around us, but it must be directed first and foremost toward sin in oneself. That's called repentance.

We're back to self-control, aren't we?