

A Word about TEMPER

J.R. Miller:

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."
Ephesians 4:32

More than half of us are bad-tempered—at least an English social scientist tells us so. He claims that this is no mere general statement and no bit of guesswork; he gives us the figures for it. He arranged to have about two thousand people put unconsciously under espionage as to their ordinary temper, and then had careful reports made of the results. The calculations of the returns has been announced, and is decidedly unflattering to the two thousand tempers that were thus put to the test. More than half of these people—to be entirely accurate, 52 percent of them—are set down as bad-tempered in various degrees.

The dictionary has been well-near exhausted of adjectives of this order, in giving the different shades of bad-temper: aggressive, angry, bickering, bitter, capricious, choleric, contentious, crotchety, despotic, domineering, easily offended, gloomy, grumpy, hasty, huffy, irritable, morose, obstinate, reproachful, peevish, sulky, surly, vindictive—these are some of the qualifying words. There are employed, in all, 46 terms which describe a bad temper.

We do not like to believe that the case is quite so serious—that many of us are unamiable in some offensive degree. It is easier to confess our neighbor's faults and infirmities, than our own. So, therefore, quietly taking refuge for ourselves among the 48 percent of good-tempered people—we are willing to admit that a great many of the people we know, have at times rather ungentle tempers. They are easily provoked; they fly into a passion on very slight occasion; they are haughty, domineering, peevish, fretful or vindictive!

What is even worse, most of them appear to make no effort to grow out of their infirmities of disposition! The sour fruit does not come to mellow ripeness in the passing years; the roughness is not polished off the diamond to reveal its lustrous hidden beauty. The same petulance, pride, vanity, selfishness and other disagreeable qualities are found in the life, year after year! Where there is a struggle to overcome one's faults and grow out of them, and where the progress toward better and more beautiful spiritual character is perceptible, though ever so slow—we should have sympathy. But where one appears unconscious of one's blemishes, and manifests no desire to conquer one's faults—there is little ground for encouragement.

It is man-like it is—to fall into sin.

It is fiend-like it is—to dwell therein.

It is saint-like it is—for sin to grieve.

It is God-like it is—for sin to leave.

Bad temper is such a disfigurement of character, and, besides, works such harm to one's self and to one's neighbors, that no one should spare any pains or cost to have it cured! The ideal Christian life is one of unbroken kindness. It is dominated by love—the love whose portrait is drawn for us in the immortal thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." That is the picture of the ideal Christian life!

We have but to turn to the gospel pages—to find the story of a life in which all this was realized. Jesus never lost his temper. He lived among people who tried him at every point—some by their dullness, others by their bitter enmity and persecution—but he never failed in sweetness of disposition, in patience, in self-denying love. Like the flowers which give out their perfume only when crushed; like the odoriferous wood which bathes the axe which hews it with fragrance; the life of Christ yielded only the tenderer, sweeter love to the rough impact of men's harshness and wrong. That is the pattern on which we should strive to fashion our life and our character. Every outbreak of violent temper, every shade of ugliness in disposition, mars the radiant loveliness of the picture we are seeking to have fashioned in our souls! Whatever is not loving—is unlovely character.

There is another phase: bad-tempered people are continually hurting others, oftentimes their best and truest friends. Some people are sulky—and one person's sulkiness casts a chilling shadow over a whole household! Others are so sensitive, ever watching for slights and offended by the merest trifles—that even their nearest friends have no freedom of fellowship with them! Others are despotic, and will brook no kindly suggestion, nor

listen to any expression of opinion! Others are so quarrelsome that even the meekest and gentlest person cannot live peaceably with them! Whatever may be the special characteristic of the bad temper, it makes only pain and humiliation for the person's friends!

A bad temper usually implies a sharp tongue. Sometimes, indeed, it makes one morose and glum. A brother and a sister living together are said often to have passed months without speaking to each other, though eating at the same table and sleeping under the same roof! A man recently died who for twelve years, it was said, had never spoken to his wife, though they continued to dwell together, and three times daily sat down together at the same table!

Bad temper sometimes runs to sullen silence. Such silence is not golden. Generally, however, a bad-tempered person has an unbridled tongue and speaks out his hateful feelings; and there is no limit to the pain and the harm which angry and ugly words can produce in gentle hearts!

It would be easy to extend this portrayal of the evils of bad temper—but it will be more profitable to inquire HOW a bad-tempered person may become good-tempered. There is no doubt that this happy change is possible in any case. There is no temper so obdurately bad—that it cannot be trained into sweetness. The grace of God can take the most unlovely life—and transform it into the image of Christ.

As in all moral changes, however, grace does not work independently of human volition and exertion. "I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me!" Colossians 1:29. God always works helpfully—with those who strive to reach Christlikeness. We must resist the devil—or he will not flee from us. We must struggle to obtain the victory over our own evil habits and dispositions, although it is only through Christ that we can be conquerors. He will not make us conquerors, unless we enter the battle. We have a share, and a large and necessary share, in the culture of our own character.

The bad-tempered man will never become good-tempered until he deliberately sets for himself the task, and enters resolutely and persistently upon its accomplishment. The transformation will never come of itself, even in a Christian! People do not grow out of ugly temper into sweet refinement—as a peach ripens from sourness into lusciousness.

Then the thing to be accomplished, is not the destroying of the temper; temper is a good quality in its place. The task is not destruction—but control. A man is very weak—who has a strong temper without the power of self-control. Likewise is he weak—who has a weak temper. The truly strong man—is he who is strong in the element of temper—that is, has strong passions and feelings capable of great anger—and also has perfect self-control. When Moses failed and broke down in temper—in self-control, he was not the man to lead the people into the Promised Land; therefore God at once prepared to relieve him. The task to be set, therefore, in self-discipline is the gaining of complete mastery over every feeling and emotion, so as to be able to restrain every impulse to speak or to act unadvisedly.

We represent Christ in this world. People cannot see Him; they must look at us—to see a little of what He is like. Whatever great work we may do for Christ—if we fail to live out His life of love, kindness and patience—we fail in an essential part of our duty as Christians.

Nor can we be greatly useful in our personal life, while our daily conduct is stained by frequent outbursts of anger, and other exhibitions of bad temper. In the old fable, the spider goes about doing mischief wherever it creeps, while the bee by its wax and its honey, makes "sweetness and light" wherever it flies. We should be bees—rather than be spiders; living to turn darkness into light—and to put a little more sweetness into the life of all who know us. But only as our own lives shine in the brightness of holy love, and our hearts and lips distill the sweetness of patience and gentleness, can we fulfill our mission in this world—as Christ's true messengers to men.

Then there is need of a higher standard of character in this regard, than many people seem to set for themselves. We never rise higher than our ideals. The perfect beauty of Christ should ever be envisioned in our hearts—as that which we would attain for ourselves. The honor of our Master's name—should impel us to strive ever toward Christlikeness in spirit and in disposition.

In striving to overcome our impatience with others, it will help us to remember that we and they have the common heritage of a sinful nature. The thing in them which irritates us—is, no doubt, balanced by something in us which looks just as unlovely in their eyes and just as sorely tries their forbearance toward us!

Very likely, if we think our neighbors are hard to live peaceably withâ€”they think about the same of us! And who shall tell in whom lies the greater degree of fault? Certain it is, that a really good-tempered person can rarely ever be drawn into a quarrel with anyone. He is resolutely determined that he will not be a partner in any unChristian strife. He would rather suffer wrongfully, than offer any retaliation. He has learned to bearâ€”and to forbear. Then, by his gentle tactâ€”he is able to conciliate any who are angry.

A fable relates that in the depth of a forest, there lived two foxes. One of them said to the other one day, in the politest of fox-language, "Let's quarrel!"

"Very well," said the other; "but how shall we go about it?"

They tried all sorts of waysâ€”but in vain, for both would give way. At last, one fox brought two stones.

"There!" said he. "Now you say they are yoursâ€”and I'll say they are mineâ€”and we will quarrel and fight and scratch! Now I'll begin.

"Those stones are mine!"

"All right!" answered the other fox, "you are welcome to them."

"But we shall never quarrel at this rate," replied the first.

"No, indeed, you old simpleton! Don't you know, that it takes two to make a quarrel?"

So the foxes gave up trying to quarrel, and never played again at this silly game.

The fable has its lesson for other creatures, besides foxes. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you," Paul tells us, "we should live peaceably with all men."

A wise man says, "Every man takes care that his neighbors shall not cheat himâ€”but a day comes when he begins to careâ€”that he does not cheat his neighbors. Then all goes well." So long as a man sees only the quarrelsome temper of his neighborâ€”he is not far toward holiness. But when he has learned to watch and to try to control his own temper, and to weep over his own infirmitiesâ€”he is on the way to Christ-likeness, and will soon be conqueror over his own weakness!

Life is too short to spend even one day of it in bickering and strife! Love is too sacred to be forever lacerated and torn by the ugly briars of sharp temper! Surely we ought to learn to be loving and patient with othersâ€”since God has to show every day such infinite patience toward us! Is not the very essence of true loveâ€”the spirit that is not easily provoked, that bears all things? Can we not, then, train our life to sweeter gentleness? Can we not learn to be touched even a little roughly, without resenting it? Can we not bear little injuries, and apparent injustices, without flying into a rage? Can we not have in us something of the mind of Christ, which will enable us, like him, to endure all wrong and injury and give back no word or look of bitterness? The way over which we and our friend walk together, is too short to be spent in wrangling.