

7 days of practicing grace

daily devotions for managing anger

Day 1

Genesis 2:7 “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Take a deep breath. Hold it for a few moments, then slowly let it out.

God’s gift of breath is so easily overlooked. We are busy, we are stressed, and we are frustrated, so we do not have time to think about something that comes so naturally. If I do it without thinking about it, why bother thinking about it?

Deep, slow breathing is one of the most common coping skills that therapists teach to clients. Pushing oxygen into the deepest parts of the abdomen means supplying more oxygen to the brain, a lowered heart rate, a calmed nervous system, access to the prefrontal cortex (the decision-making part of the brain), among many other benefits (such as keeping you alive!). Deep, slow breathing is one of the easiest ways to calm down.

God’s gifts are not something to be easily dismissed. In the parable of the talents, the talent-holders are responsible for how they handle these resources. Breath is one of God’s gifts that should be acknowledged and appropriately handled. Taking time for deep breathing gives you a moment to thank God for his gift to you.

Lord, thank you for my breath. Help me to remember that every time I remember to breathe.

Take time to breathe slowly today. Think of God and his gift each time you remember to do this.

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Day 2

Philippians 4:12a “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...”

Imagine walking into a busy grocery store, picking out that one item you need, and getting into the shortest line...which happens to be ten patrons deep. How do you feel? What do you do?

In the above passage, Paul says he has *learned* to be content. He wasn't given contentment. He didn't pray for it. He *learned* it. One way to practice grace is to practice patience. We pray for patience, but when God hands us an opportunity to learn patience, we get frustrated. We forget that—like contentment—patience is learned. It requires intentionally looking for opportunities to practice patience. It requires seeing and intentionally joining the longest line, then practicing deep breathing, calming thoughts, smiling, humming, and talking with the other patrons while waiting.

When growing a bicep, we know we have to curl the dumbbell and slowly increase the weight, long before the bicep appears evident. It is there, but it needs to be exercised before it becomes natural and easy to use. Patience requires the same attention. It won't be easy at first. We need to set aside time each day and intentionally find ways to practice patience in annoying circumstances. Doing this over and over leads to a brain and body (nervous system) that takes everyday irritating situations from frustrating to calming.

Lord, help me to see the everyday opportunities to practice patience.

Look for opportunities to practice patience. Anticipate the eighth red light. Smile when the opportunity arrives as a pesky neighbor. Aim for the longest line. Then, practice deep, slow breathing, smile, and pick a fun thought to ponder. This is practicing patience. This is practicing grace.

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Day 3

Romans 12:19-20 “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’”

Anger is an emotion that often comes from hurt. If we add unforgiveness to the hurt, this leads to bitterness, increased anger and depression. Our attempts at revenge only add fuel to the fire because God did not put “healing” in the revenge process. Revenge never leads to true healing. True healing comes from forgiveness. True healing comes from giving kindness in response to hurt. True healing comes from doing the opposite of what the person did to us. True healing involves practicing grace.

Paul gives this great example of how to handle situations where we want to take revenge. Essentially, he tells us to do the opposite of what we want to do! If someone bumps you at the grocery store, give them a wider space. If someone cuts you off, let them pass and smile and wave (with all fingers!). If someone else grabs the last bag of chips you were wanting, offer to pay for them. In doing so, we give God the opportunity to take his own revenge and we release ourselves from the burden of bitterness.

God, help me first to remember your grace toward me, then to practice this grace toward others.

Practice grace today as Paul describes above. When it’s tough, take a moment first to remember God’s grace toward you—not to add shame, but to give yourself encouragement.

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Day 4

John 16:33 ...in this world you will have trouble...

Sometimes we are “surprised” by the troubling things around us. “How can they do that? Why can’t the government do things differently? Can you believe they cut me off?!” Jesus is very clear that we will have troubles in this world. Of all people, he felt the injustice of being ridiculed for something he was not, accused of doing things he didn’t do, and killed for sins he didn’t commit. In John 15:20b Jesus says, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” While this is referring to persecution over following Christ, we can take away a broader message that things *will* go wrong around us.

Overcoming anger means practicing grace, and practicing grace means turning to God when others hurt us. When you are offended, ask God to reassure you. When you are accused, ask God to defend you. When you are annoyed, ask God to help you show grace. When you see injustice in the world, ask God if it’s yours to do something about—and if it’s not, ask him to help you let go of it. And when you are wronged, ask God to remind you how Jesus was wronged by your own sin. At all turns, when you are angry, ask God for help in changing your perspective in a way that focuses less on the injustice and more on his gift of grace towards you.

Jesus says with confidence after all this: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Lord, help me to overcome my desire to control every injustice that comes my way.

Practice grace by reminding yourself of God’s forgiveness toward you when you are tempted to focus on the sins of others.

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Day 5

Psalm 139:23-24 “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Learning to be gracious involves looking at places where we are not gracious—at places where we tend to hold anger. This means looking inside the heart and it is a vulnerable journey that many people are unwilling to take. The journey inward is risky and scary because we are afraid of what we might find. *What if I’m not who I want to be? What if God sees something I don’t want him to see? What if I find something that is unforgiveable?*

God made you and loves the way he made you, he sees who you are and who you have become and still loves you, and he has already forgiven you—even for things you don’t know about.

The Psalmist’s request to be searched by God isn’t because God doesn’t know anything, it is the Psalmist’s attempt at joining God in the process of searching himself. It is inviting God to bring the Psalmist’s attention to those inner parts that God already knows and the Psalmist has avoided. To do this, we must trust God. To trust God, we must know who he is:

God is compassionate

God is kind

God loves you

Your God is compassionate and kind, and he loves you. He won’t abandon you on this journey inward and he won’t lash out in anger. Give him access to the places inside that need the most healing and look for the gentle ways he enters these spaces.

Lord, help me to remember your goodness as I show myself to you.

Spend time in prayer today, allowing God to show you some inner places that need care.

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Day 6

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

As we learned earlier this week, ongoing anger tends to come from unresolved hurts. Whether those hurts occurred yesterday, last year, or 40 years ago, they get bigger and bigger like a soda can being shaken over and over. Eventually, someone bumps the can, it hits the corner of the table, and sprays on anyone and everyone around—regardless of whether or not they were involved in the hurt.

Dealing with past hurts is important for our relationships with others and our relationship with God. It means acknowledging the hurts happen (not justifying or diminishing) and also acknowledging how those hurts have permanently changed our lives. It also means forgiving.

Unforgiveness is the easiest way to get stuck in a pattern of bitterness, which leads to anger and depression. We feel that we have more control if we don't forgive. Ironically, the unforgiveness is the very thing that influences our anger and our relationships for a much longer period of the time than the original hurt ever did. The hurt made a difference, the unforgiveness traps us in that hurt.

There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. God forgives each of us, but we are not all reconciled to God because we have not all turned to God. Forgiveness is the work of the one who has been wronged. Reconciliation only happens if both parties are willing to move forward in relationship. Reconciliation is a different conversation with different parameters. While God wants reconciliation, he doesn't require it. He does, however, require forgiveness from his followers.

Lord, help me to learn to forgive those who have hurt me. Show me your own grace toward me so I can pass that grace to others.

If you struggle with anger toward someone or a circumstance, try feeling sad instead of anger. Then, practice letting go of that sadness and moving toward acceptance and forgiveness.

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Day 7

Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus wants us to be free from our sins, our hurts, and our anger. He knows that when we hold onto these things, we carry a burden that we were never meant to carry. Instead, he gives us permission to take off this yoke—the burden of anger—and take on his yoke, which is easy and light.

Every day you carry your anger around with you is a back-breaking day. To use a term from my gym-obsessed son, it is “back and shoulder day” every day, all day. My son knows well that he cannot work out his back and shoulders every day, all day long.

Carrying a burden all the time isn’t weight-lifting, it is back-breaking. Jesus invites us to take off the burden of anger and to put on his light yoke of forgiveness and love. Releasing anger leads to freedom. And if you think this is only an emotional term, I’ve had clients in my office who have released hurts and anger say, “I actually feel lighter, like a weight has lifted off my shoulders.” Another client once said, “It’s like I was carrying this heavy suitcase around my whole life and I finally set it down.”

Trust that letting go of anger can lead to freedom. Trust that the God you serve has the power to help you with this. Trust the power of forgiveness. To forgive is to practice grace, and to practice grace is to overcome anger.

Lord, thank you for your grace and forgiveness toward me. Thank you for offering your light yoke in place of my heavy yoke.

Trade yokes with God today. Every time you sense anger due to hurt, imagine yourself giving him a heavy suitcase and taking from him a small sack with your favorite meal.