

For years, Celestine Chua carried a lot of anger within her, though she didn't know it at the time. For the most part, she would be relatively easy-going with people or cheerful. She would occasionally get frustrated but not think much of it.

In her words, “many of us seem to carry anger with us like it's a part of our identity. Many of us seem to wear anger like it's a self-enhancing booster, an accolade of superiority, and a natural part of being a human.” And indeed, while we should not ignore anger, and sometimes anger can in fact be healthy when we recognize an injustice, there is also the unhealthy kind of anger that can cause problems.

For Celes, as she calls herself, she writes that one day she was having a conversation with a friend about a common friend the two of them shared. He was like a brother to her. But there were some things he did where he let her down, and Celes lost confidence in him. She was venting to their mutual friend about how disappointed she was at their other friend for his actions.

As he listened, he asked if he could speak openly to her about something that had been on his mind. She told him she wanted to hear what he had to say. His response was that she tended to have very harsh expectations of others, and that it could be tough to live up to her standards which were too high. In response, she asked him if he had expectations of others, to which he replied he did. But the difference was that when people did not live up to expectations that he had, anger was

not the result. Celes couldn't quite get this, saying "if someone doesn't live up to your expectation, you would naturally be angry wouldn't you?" to which he responded that he would not become angry, but just sad about the situation.

This caused Celes to start doing some soul-searching, and with some digging she realized that while she might not be angry on the surface, there was still a lot of anger in her life.

It stemmed from her childhood. Her parents were not abusive, but she grew up in an angry household. Her parents would constantly argue with one another. When she'd yell and tell them to stop, they would for a brief amount of time before the arguing started going again. And when she became a teenager and she and her mom would routinely fight or she would lash out in anger, but then as she got older and seemingly more mature, the anger just kind of subsided as the family moved into a new home. But, in her words, "the anger was still there, right inside of me. It never went away. It merely laid dormant, ready to be triggered anytime when the right conditions were in place." And again, for the most part, she was not an angry person. Her anger wouldn't be directed at others, and she was resolved having grown up around anger, she would not blow up at people. But this conversation with her friend got her to thinking that just because she was not yelling and

screaming all the time, did not mean that she was was over her anger problem. Rather, she was just ignoring it, and it was coming out in anger towards her friend.

It was after this conversation that she began to see that she wasn't as happy of a person as she initially thought. She found that she would feel ticked off whenever something didn't go her way, even if it was something small like the bus coming late or people standing in her way or a fussy child. She tried to ignore these things, but she said it didn't change the fact that angry emotions were stirred up. And then she saw in her friend a person she was becoming. She had a disagreement with a friend, who started berating her in text messages, airing unkind statements, and being overly critical of her, talking over her when she tried to reconcile. Celes though saw that her friend was overcome with anger, and this was not the jovial, kind and cheery person she had come to know - this was now a cold, distant person. She says that the anger was entirely in her friend's court, and she did not feel anger at all, but rather "all I wanted to do was to reach out to the dear friend whom I had known in the past year two years and reconnect...all I wanted to do was to restore the friendship." And while the friendship was sadly not restored, Celes said it again made her realize how anger in her past, when she didn't deal with it, damaged her relationships, the people she has loved, and even herself as her simmering anger, even if it wasn't manifesting itself all the time, was being seen by others, from her dentist who asked if she clenched her jaw, to how she felt when her expectations

weren't meant, to her spirituality, as she asked herself "can you imagine the spiritual implications? The wear and tear my soul had undergone? The fraying of my soul. All these had been unnecessary." And then there are the third parties that had been affected by anger, such as Celes and her brother from her parents anger, or people she was irritated with over the years but not necessarily angry with.

Today, she has learned to deal with her anger by letting go of it and recognizing it's causes and finds herself much better off and truly happy. And while her story might sound like something more useful for a psychological seminar, in reality it gets at the heart of our Gospel today, which is getting at the root causes of our sins.

We continue the Sermon on the Mount this week, and Jesus cuts to the chase: he has not come to abolish the law, not even the smallest letter of it. Rather, what He does is to help us understand the true meaning of the law. At the time He came (and some still do this today), many of the Pharisees and Jewish leaders had gotten caught up in the letter of the law. As a result, it was overly burdensome and also misunderstood. Jesus though is challenging people to understand it at a whole new level by making it interior.

And so we get this challenging reading today which has to be taken in context, which looks at three areas of life where we should strive to excel: with dealing

with anger in our relationships, in dealing with sins of the flesh, and in living out the vocation of marriage.

First, with respect to violence, Jesus says that you have heard it said you shall not kill, but that He says whoever is angry with his brother is guilty. He then says you have heard it said you shall not commit adultery, but that whoever looks at a woman with lust in his heart has committed adultery.

Now a person with a very sensitive conscience might hear this Gospel with fear and think themselves to be some kind of horrible person for being angry, or having impure thoughts. That should not be the case at all. It is normal to be angry from time to time; one also can't control what comes into one's mind. The problem though is sometimes we can just focus on the surface of sin, but not get at its root cause. We might not be angry at the Thanksgiving dinner on the outside, but inside we're harboring a grudge. Or we might just have passing thoughts, but deep down we might be struggling with some addictions to sins of the flesh or have a disordered view of the human body. And while Jesus may be focusing on two sins here of anger and sins of the flesh, really He could go on about an array of sins and apply the same kind of logic. The Church is not interested in creating average people - people who know how to follow the rules and to avoid mortal sin. The Church is not interested in creating generally good people - people who come to Mass and

who go to work and who follow the rules. The Church is interested in creating saints, for if we had a mission statement for our universal Church, it would probably be “helping form citizens of the earth to be citizens of heaven.” And to do that means being perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect - loving God entirely and loving one another entirely. And to do that requires work.

The reason I shared Celes’ story is that it shows how this work unfolds.

Looking specifically at the sins Jesus gets at, first with anger, we again have to be mindful that sometimes anger is justified. If someone hurts you or a family member; when we see injustice in the world; these are reasons to be angry. And even in family, let’s say your brother cheated on his wife, or lied, or is not respecting his spouse and kids. I’d certainly be angry. In such situations though anger should be not a gateway to rage, but a gateway to help. We see a situation, are angry about it, and want to change things for the better. Unfortunately anger can sometimes lead to violence and ruptured relationships. Killing of course is the ultimate expression of violence, and while not too many people do that, a lot of people do with anger what Celes did - try to bury it or ignore it and pretend it’s not there. But then it will come out. Maybe not in killing, but in saying “raqa” (you fool) to your brother or another person you know in heated arguments, or in harboring resentment. The challenge for us with anger is to do some work. Dr. Phil, in talking about anger,

stresses identifying the emotion our anger covers (we could be perhaps fearful of failure, or jealous over someone's success, or we're angry at ourself because our spouse is telling us the truth and we don't want to acknowledge that we're letting our health slip or struggling with being motivated). We then have to acknowledge that. We also have to look for the true source of anger. Maybe it's not our brother we are really angry at; maybe it's ourself or someone else, or a situation at work or school. We also need to identify an unfulfilled need. For someone angry all the time, it could be they can't forgive themselves for the way they've behaved while angry, or maybe they have a need to forgive others for their actions. So, too, is it impotent to recognize when we're angry. It's easy to see when we are yelling, but is anger bubbling up within you like Celes? If that's the case, do something constructive. As I share with married couples, don't be hesitant to argue every so often and to talk things out. Just look carefully at the words you use and how you express your feelings. It's so important to talk things out with people because again, our hope should be to help people change for the better - and that includes ourselves by getting at the root cause of anger.

Concerning sins of the flesh, Jesus challenges people that "you've heard it said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He then encourages people to mutilate themselves if one part of their body is causing them to sin. Of

course Jesus is not being literal here; He's using a common technique of exaggeration a rabbi would use to make a point. It again gets to the heart. Sins of the flesh are one of the most common struggles that people have. Many people have thoughts go through their minds; even President Jimmy Carter had that famous line when asked if he had committed adultery that he had done so many times in his heart. The problem with sins of the flesh is they are so easy to justify, especially if we are not literally committing adultery. This is a private thing just between me and a computer; no one will ever know. But remember, there are no such things as private sins. A person who battles this may now start to look at a person's body differently. Or it may lead to doing other more serious sins such as adultery. So to those who battle this common struggle, it's important to again to not ignore the problem, but to be proactive. Get out of bad situations where you may be prone to take a fall by going for a walk, or doing another activity. Avoid the near occasion of sin by putting the computer away and turning it off. Bring it to prayer. For parents, encourage your kids to remember that their value is not in their body, and pay attention to what your kids look at on the computer, and know what kids to are exposed to in school conversations or even at the supermarket when they see the tabloid headlines. And certainly, strive to look to the heart always. While the body can be physically beautiful, we also need to remember that every person has a heart and soul; the person in a magazine or on a computer is someone's son or daughter,

grandson or granddaughter and has a family and friends. By looking at someone just for their body, we diminish the truth about them to just the outside, when the reality is everyone is a body and soul.

Finally, Jesus speaks on marriage, saying whoever divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Again, a very challenging verse that has to be taken in context. The bottom line is some marriages fall apart for complicated reasons; sometimes a person is loving and the other is not returning that love. The problem in Jesus' time was that women were mistreated by the practice. According to Rabbinic law, a woman could be divorced with or without her will, but a man only with his will. Divorce was simple; it was simply a note given to a woman in the presence of two witnesses in Jewish culture. Things were not better among the Gentiles; in Greek society, adultery was pretty commonly accepted among men; but again there was a double standard where women were treated as second-class citizens, unable to even be in public alone. While women in Rome had somewhat more freedom, they also had an extremely high divorce rate. In society as a whole, a man could do all sorts of things to make life miserable for his wife; and there was also no social network for a woman who was divorced, so she either had to find another man, or sell her body. So what you have is a situation in which there is a misunderstanding of what love is and means. Before original sin, upon seeing Eve, his equal, Adam cries out "this one at last is

bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” But because of sin entering the picture, people have made at times selfish decisions to not love as God loved, but to abuse love - the same kind of abuse that occurs in lust when the body is objectified; or even in misuse of anger when a person mistreats others and doesn’t think of the words that they are saying. And so again, what Jesus is stressing here is to try to be perfect. To look at the love you have for your spouse and to respect that person, to work through the valleys, and to love as He loved until the end.

In his book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells the tale of a Stalinist-era gulag in Siberia. The title character is wrongfully jailed, his only crime being a P.O.W. captured by the Germans in World War II whom the Soviets think was a spy. He questions how his fellow prisoner, Alyosha, a Christian, can cling to a God who leaves him in prison, hungry. Ivan challenges his Christian friend to ask God to provide food. Alyosha’s response stuns the skeptics. Instead of asking God for food, Alyosha tells Ivan that they must pray “that the Lord Jesus should remove the scum from our hearts.” It gets to what Jesus says in Mark 7:14 (from our daily Mass Wednesday): Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person but the things that come out from within are what defile.”And in real life, when talking about how things are in the world, Solzhenitsyn stated: “Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great

disasters that had befallen Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Indeed, when we look at the bad things that happen in the world, so much of it is attributable to us. Many people say they believe in God; but even for the practicing Christian, we have forgotten what God means. God is perfect, and we are called to that same perfection. The opening words of our first reading say it best: "If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you shall live." All of us are sinners. And the beautiful thing with our faith is how because our God is perfect love, no matter how often we slip and fail, if we mean it with our heart that we are sorry, He will be there to welcome us back. The saints are full of stories of their battles with all kinds of sins. But the other beautiful thing with our Catholic faith is this is not the faith for the mediocre. We might be able to trick someone into thinking we are perfect based on how we dress, or what we do on the outside, but God always sees to the heart. And the healthy

person says “there’s a lot of good that I’m doing, but I can always be better.” To do better though, we have to hone in on that word “choose” from the first reading: we have to choose to follow the commandments. And that is about a whole lot more than fulfilling a Sunday obligation, not stealing, etc. It’s about getting to the heart and having an interior conversion. When we do that, we can one day stand before God and not say “I didn’t hurt anyone” but say “I had my ups and downs, but I realized you wanted me to use what I had been given to become a better person and grow in my love for you and for the people you put into my life, and here is what I did.” Like Celes, we can bury our faults for a time and pretend that they aren’t there - but just because they aren’t at the surface doesn’t mean they aren’t in our hearts. Grace helps us to remove the scum from our heart and to love God and others with perfection - may we daily use it to glorify God so that one day we can see what eye has not seen and ear has not heard - gazing upon the God who is love for all eternity by returning the love fully that we have been given.