

Not Easily Provoked

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

- (4) Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,
- (5) Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
- (6) Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
- (7) Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.
- (8) Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

Today's text is a segment of the Apostle Paul's presentation of *charity* as the superior Christian virtue, superior even to *faith* and *hope* (1CO 13:13). Faith and hope in *unseen realities* are temporary expedients whose purposes end when the object of their focus is finally seen. Faith is "...the evidence of things not seen" (HEB 11:1), and "...hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" (ROM 8:24). We will not need to have faith or hope in an unseen Savior, departed saints or heaven at the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will see them all. By contrast, "Charity never faileth..." (1CO 13:8). Whereas faith and hope are centered in *unseen* things, charity is centered in *seen* things: our fellow-saints for which charity is the *bond of perfectness* (COL 3:14). On the day of Christ when He gathers together in one all His elect in heaven and earth (EPH 1:10), the entire redeemed family will be from that point and forward forever seen one of another. Thus it is appropriate that *charity never faileth* (v. 8); everything else Paul here mentions is temporary but charity alone is perpetual.

My focus today is on one aspect of charity: "...not easily provoked..." (v. 5). Provoke means "To incite or urge (a person or animal) to some act or to do something; to stimulate to action; to excite, rouse, stir up, spur on." Provoking may be to something positive, as when we are told to "...consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (HEB 10:24). Believers ought to be thus easily provoked! It is evident that Paul is speaking of being easily provoked to something negative such as immediate anger, excessive anger, violence, imprudent speech, retaliatory speech or actions, etc. Our culture is being overrun with such displays of ungoverned passions. It is as if everyone has a proverbial chip on their shoulder. Consider the rash of road rage incidents, workplace violence, workers "going postal," parental abuse of children, thin-skinned insecurity, police overreactions, etc. These are all commonly control issues: somebody who is drunk on the control of others or who is persuaded that he is not in control of his situation or that he is a pawn of no genuine value to the forces that manipulate or oppress him. People who improperly react to something which provokes them do so out of some perceived loss of control. Their will is being crossed by something or someone and they do not process that in a godly, rational, measured fashion.

Let it be noted that anger is not evil of itself. God Himself is said to be provoked to anger by persistent sinners (DEU 9:7-8; DEU 32:16, etc.) and sometimes His anger waxes hot (EXO 22:24). Jesus Christ displayed anger towards commercialized religion (JOH 2:13-17) and hard-hearted Pharisees (MAR 3:5). Civil authorities were warned in prophecy to submit to Him or suffer His wrath, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little..." (PSA 2:10-12). But neither the Father or the Son get angry quickly. "The LORD is...slow to anger..." (PSA 103:8). Even Christ's thrashing of the temple-defilers was a meditated one: He took time to make a scourge of small cords (JOH 2:15); His reaction was not "knee-jerk." Hence, we are to be "...slow to wrath" (JAM 1:19; PRO 14:29). Also, anger must be justified, for "...whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment..." (MAT 5:22). On this note, let us be cautious about jumping to conclusions on the basis of limited or spurious information. Much foolish anger is

generated by ignorance or incomplete (and sometimes selective) information. We are to avoid *evil surmisings* (1TI 6:4), i.e., suppositions of evil character or intention that are lacking credible evidence. Whenever you put a black construction on someone's actions or intentions without adequate proof or without giving that person an opportunity to explain himself (*Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?*, JOH 7:51), remember that *evil surmisings* were instrumental in the persecution and prosecution of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was assumed to be a prince of devils (MAT 9:34), one who had a devil, and a mad man (JOH 10:20), a threat to civil authority (JOH 11:48-50) and many other wild speculations. Circulating unfounded speculations that darken someone's character is *slander*, a sin before God (PRO 10:18) and an invitation to civil action. We know how much it hurts when someone's rumor smears our reputation; let us not be guilty of this ourselves, and this is "...the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself..." (JAM 2:8).

As previously noted, being easily provoked is a control issue. But the real control issue is a lack of control over one's own spirit. If something happens that unsettles us or someone does something that frustrates or offends us, we tend to feel vulnerable and the tendency is to immediately regain our security. But being easily provoked unto an improper reaction is only evidence of a pre-existing vulnerability: "He that hath no rule over his spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls" (PRO 25:28). A meditated reaction is best: "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (PRO 16:32). When we show the world that we are easily provoked, we show the world our weakness, and the perceived threat to our control which provokes us outwardly is then exacerbated by the manifest lack of inward control we display. NOTE: *We do not gain control by losing control!* Satan and this world are ready to exploit us through this weakness. The Scribes and Pharisees were doing the work of their father the devil (JOH 8:44) when they tried to entrap Christ when they "...began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things; Laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him" (LUK 11:53-54). The wicked love to "...make a man an offender for a word..." (ISA 29:21) and when the righteous is not willing to say something inappropriate, the wicked will try to pressure him into doing so by pushing his "hot buttons." Satan had previously used this ploy against Moses. Israel had murmured and complained to and about Moses for so long that he finally snapped back in frustration (NUM 20:1-11). And, "...it went ill with Moses for their sakes: Because they provoked his spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips" (PSA 106:32-33). Moses was therefore barred from entering the promised land (NUM 20:12).

Believers are to strive to be "...temperate in all things..." (1CO 9:25), *temperance* being a spiritual fruit that is added to faith, virtue and knowledge (GAL 5:22-23 c/w 2PE 1:5-6). *Temperance* is "The practice or habit of restraining oneself in provocation, passion, desire, etc.; suppression of any tendency to passionate action; in early use, esp. self-control, restraint, or forbearance, when provoked to anger or impatience." There comes a time when an angry or otherwise impassioned response to a provocation is justified, as when Christ meditatively, deliberately flogged the temple-defilers (JOH 2:13-17). Mind that it was not His personal honor that was being trodden upon by those wretches, it was the honor of the Father Whose house was being polluted. Herein is a key to success in living temperately: what is most important is not our honor, our reputation, our good name, but God's. An undue emphasis on self, wherein we quickly take umbrage at something that misrepresents us, falsely accuses us, makes us look bad, or gets in the way of our will is often the source of our improper reaction to provocation. It is no accident that before Paul describes charity as not easily provoked, he wrote, "...charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up....seeketh not her own..." (1CO 13:4-5). A high opinion of self struggles with anything that tarnishes its image or counters its will. Accordingly, Paul elsewhere wrote, "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly..." (ROM 12:3). If we would think soberly, we would

accept that our will is not really all that important in the big picture; it is God's will that is important. If our will gets crossed from time to time, it need not easily provoke us to a hasty or improper reaction. And here let us be on guard against another tendency: sometimes a supposed righteous indignation for God's honor may be a mask or excuse for what is really a lack of temper or of good judgment. Once, a village of Samaritans did not receive the Lord Jesus Christ. His disciples immediately reacted to that by suggesting they be destroyed with fire from heaven (LUK 9:51-54). Jesus rebuked them on the spot for their rush to harsh judgment, "...Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them..." (LUK 9:55-56).

The only person whose will should never be crossed is God. Jesus even taught us to pray to the Father, "...Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (MAT 6:10). If we think our will should never be crossed, perhaps we are suffering from too much pride, the kind of pride that made Satan fall from glory (1TI 3:6), the kind of pride that thinks, "...I will be like the most High" (ISA 14:12-14). Mind, though, that God "...is not easily provoked..." but "...slow to anger..." (PSA 103:8). The only One with a sovereign, perfect will still restrains Himself when provoked by sinners who cross it.

Something that helps us in not giving in easily to provocation is to distinguish between camels and gnats. Remember that Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, "Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (MAT 23:24). He was speaking of their tendency to make a big deal out of things of small importance while missing the truly important things. This ties in with what He had earlier taught about minor offenses in general (MAT 5:38-42), to wit, don't make a federal case out of a misdemeanor (I paraphrase). Save the hasty, impassioned reactions for the big stuff: something, for example, that is a clear and present danger to yourself or those around you. It has been wisely said that great men are not bothered by insults or complaints any more than an elephant worries about flies on its back. If we place too much value on other men's opinion of ourselves, we will open ourselves up to unnecessary grief and perhaps to a regrettable reaction. By contrast, if it is God's opinion of ourselves that we most value, we can identify with Paul when he said to the church at Corinth, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment...but he that judgeth me is the Lord" (1CO 4:3-4). If we must react with immediate passion to something that provokes us like a false accusation or a scornful insult, let it be for the sake of our faith, not our self-image. And let the passion be thus: "Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven..." (LUK 6:23).

In our personal everyday life, we are bound to be offended by someone's words. This problem is exacerbated by our technological age: now we can be offended by people we have never met from just about anywhere in the world! Again, the more value we place on others' opinions of ourselves, when multiplied by the sheer number of people with whom we interact online, is a recipe for misery. It is a harsh awakening to find out that people don't think of you as highly as you do of yourself, and they are legion! Of course, one way to insulate oneself from this discomfort is to unhook from the virtual world and concentrate on genuine interpersonal relationships face to face. But we are still likely to hear something unfair, unkind or ugly about ourselves from acquaintances. King Solomon wisely said, "Also take no heed to all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: For oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others" (ECC 7:21-22). Everyone has a bad day and makes an uncharitable remark from time to time, including you! In the absence of a chronic pattern of such speech against you by someone who otherwise is a positive asset in your life, again, *don't strain at a gnat*. A sage once said, "Write your hurts in sand, your benefits in stone; let not the occasional hurt from a good person leave a greater impression than the good he has done you."

Our culture in America is going through the death-throes of a collapsing order which once was the

envy of the world. Commensurate with the deterioration of God-fearing morality and Biblical values, corruption seems to ooze from every pore of the political and corporate worlds, and the justice system. It is as if we are living through the days Isaiah described, “And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth far off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey: and the LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment” (ISA 59:14-15). Our military continues to fight wars overseas to ostensibly defend the Constitution against foreign enemies but a too-frequent complaint is that our conduct over there is less humane than the enemy's and the resulting moral injury the troops undergo comes home with them. How many of America's fighting forces come home not only with things like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder but also with a crushing sense of futility and frustration that the Constitution they fought for over there is being trampled upon back home? And they are sensing what millions of others are sensing, to wit, that civil rights recognized (not granted) by the Constitution have been thrown under the juggernaut of an increasingly intrusive federal government which seems bent on regulating every aspect of life, commerce and even thought. The recent heavy-handed tactics brought to bear by federal authorities on a Nevada rancher over a long-standing question about grazing rights is the kind of thing that ignites bloody confrontations. This is where believers (indeed men in general) need to be particularly cautious. In an age of instant information, there is also a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. Recall the earlier remarks about not jumping to conclusions in the absence of sufficient evidence. God forbid that believers in the Prince of Peace should be easily provoked to resort to violence without knowing the facts of a matter or do so for light and transient causes. Those who imprudently are quick to rebel against established authority are the fodder for those who generally despise government and who, like Theudas and Judas, boast themselves to be somebody and lead many others to destruction in ill-planned, ill-fated attempts at rebellion (ACT 5:36-37).

The wisdom of King Solomon seems appropriate here: “If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they. Moreover the profit of the earth is for all; the king himself is served of the field” (ECC 5:8-9). Ever remember that the God to Whom the earth and its fullness belongs (PSA 24:1) knows the profit of the earth is not only for the mighty, and He certainly regards the oppression of the poor by perverted justice (JAM 5:1-5).

We are further told to guard against *fretting* (worrying, chafing oneself) about what the wicked seem to be getting away with in PSA 37:1-9.

Psalm 37:1-9

- (1) <A Psalm of David.> **Fret not thyself because of evildoers**, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity.
- (2) For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.
- (3) Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.
- (4) Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.
- (5) Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.
- (6) And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.
- (7) Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who

bringeth wicked devices to pass.

(8) Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: **fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.**

(9) For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.

There is plenty of corruption, injustice and oppression out there. It has always been thus since sin entered the creation. Feeding yourself with constant news of such things is a sure way to instigate fretting and in the frustration that all the bad news breeds in the heart, it becomes too easy to lash out at provocation---not just the provocation of the “evildoers at large” in the world but at the simple things which people whom we love do which provoke us. They become the unfortunate targets of our vented spleen against wicked people that we will probably never meet. At the root of much of this kind of fretting angst may well be a lack of faith in God's promises to care for His own even in the most trying of times. Those promises are virtually innumerable. The kind of faith in God that Jesus Christ had was one that may be claimed by every believer in Him: “I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (PSA 16:8 c/w ACT 2:25-28). He shall not be moved to react wrongly at the hearing of bad news: “He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the LORD” (PSA 112:7). He will not be “...soon shaken in mind, or be troubled...” (2TH 2:1-2). He knows that God is with him (PSA 23:4; HEB 13:5) and God is for him (LUK 1:69), and “...if God be for us, who can be against us?” (ROM 8:31).

If you have ever been confronted angrily by someone or perturbed by someone's untempered attitude, being not easily provoked is most helpful in not escalating the problem. Solomon's wisdom is again appropriate: “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (PRO 15:1). The last thing that a dangerous fire needs is more fuel: “As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife” (PRO 26:21). Again, “...let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (JAM 1:19-20). Let us not be as children for whose sake Paul instructs fathers, “...provoke not your children to wrath...” (EPH 6:4). Whereas children might be expected to improperly react to provocation, maturity accords with self-restraint and a measured response.

When we are easily provoked, our personal peace is compromised and peace is something we all should treasure. Having too much care about others' opinions of ourselves, about the injustices of life, about the uncertainties of this world, is a condition that needs to be reduced by the certain knowledge that God is in control, His love and promises are intact, and He receives the prayers of the godly.

(Philippians 4:6-7) Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. (7) And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

As in all things, Jesus Christ shows us the right way, leaving us an example to follow (1PE 2:21), “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1PE 2:23). When He was provoked by wicked men with taunts and false accusations, He “...held his peace...” (MAT 26:63). He was not easily provoked.