

Paul's sixth negative quality of love is that it is **not provoked** (13:5c). Several things about this are important to note at the outset. First of all, this term refers to an inward disposition, not to outward actions as such. Secondly, this notion of provocation is neutral – that is, it isn't itself inherently negative or positive, but it can carry either connotation. Finally, and most importantly to the point Paul was making respecting love, *the negative or positive quality of this provocation is determined by the perspective and mindset of the person and not by the particular matter (person, situation, circumstance, etc.) behind the provocation.* Thus a person may be provoked in a negative way by things which are themselves neutral or even positive; so also the opposite may be the case – which is precisely the direction in which Paul was taking his argument.

The scriptural usage of this Greek term is as follows:

- Luke employed it twice in his Acts account, once in its verb form as here in the Corinthians epistle and the other time using its noun cognate. In both instances he used it to describe Paul – the first time in relation to his disagreement with Barnabas (15:39) and the second time his inner turmoil when he walked the streets of Athens (17:16).

Though some regard the first usage as negative, it's more likely that both instances of Paul's provocation reflected the same godly conviction and zeal. In the case of Athens, Paul's heart was provoked with a deep, inner distress born of his passion for God and the truth of His gospel and a sincere love for the spiritually blind and lost Athenians.

But that same zeal for God and His gospel provoked Paul's agitation and sharp disagreement with John Mark (Acts 15:39). His concern in that clash and subsequent parting of ways was the sober obligation of Christ's ambassadors to testify truthfully to His gospel through their own single-minded devotion and faithfulness. John Mark had abandoned the work in Pamphylia and brought a reproach on Christ and His gospel and Paul was adamant that that would not happen again (ref. Acts 13:1-13, 15:30-38).

- The Hebrews writer also employed the noun cognate in exhorting his readers to provoke one another to love and deeds consistent with the life and mind of Christ (10:24). Literally rendered, his expression is *“let us consciously and purposefully consider one another unto the provocation of love and good works.”* Here, too, the connotation is entirely positive.

In each of these three instances, godly zeal and love for God lay behind the provocation and its outward manifestation. But here in the Corinthian epistle Paul was acknowledging that there is a provocation which is contrary to love – a provocation born of the lovelessness of self-concern and self-seeking. And by insisting that love is not provoked, Paul was taking a slightly different glance at love's fundamentally patient nature and orientation.

Previously it was seen that the patience Paul spoke of (13:4a) refers to love's restraint in treating a person as he justly deserves. And love withholds such treatment, not because it "looks the other way" or because of some implicit virtue in not giving an offender his due, but because it has a grander objective in view. *Love discerns and seeks the true and highest good of its object, and this perspective and singular motivation drive its response in any given situation.*

Love looks beyond the immediate issues to the larger, truly important concerns, and this is why it is willing (where appropriate to love's goal) to withhold what is justly deserved. But that very same motivation and orientation lead love to not be provoked. Just as it is capable of restraint in its treatment of others for the sake of the greater good, love is capable of attitudinal restraint: *It is able to not become irritated or agitated even where such a reaction is justified.* This attitude is all the more significant when it pertains to the arena in which such restraint is the most difficult, namely, where a person sustains *personal* insult, injustice or injury. It's one thing to not become irritated or exasperated with things, people, circumstances or situations which don't directly affect us; it's something else altogether to have that attitude toward those provocations which do. And this is especially the case with personal affronts and hurtful provocations which are unjust and undeserved. Anthony Thiselton's comments are well worth noting:

"Paul's wording looks back to the positive praise of a love that waits patiently. If love lacks patience and allows self-regard or self-importance to creep in, such contaminated love may become exasperated in pique or into bitterness, in part because self-interest has been affronted and in part because it has overreacted. 'Agapeistic' love may degenerate into a self-regarding love that nurses and parades its 'hurts.' Love then becomes corrupted into a kind of moral blackmail, and becomes manipulative. This seriously threatens the survival and growth of 'true' love, for it may generate a cycle of mutual recrimination."

This insight is helpful for discerning the connection between love as not negatively provoked and the fact that it **doesn't take into account a wrong suffered** ("love does not record wrong"; 13:5d). As with all of the qualities of love Paul mentioned, it's critically important to grasp his meaning here. Scholars put forth different renderings as best capturing the sense of Paul's expression, but virtually all agree that his basic meaning is that love doesn't keep accounts respecting offenses and wrongful and/or injurious treatment. And set alongside its predecessor, certain subtleties of this quality of love begin to emerge.

The issue isn't that love has a short memory, that it doesn't discern offenses or hurts or refuses to regard them as such; Paul's point is that love refuses to retain a record of them. The person living a life of love is fully aware of the offenses and injuries he sustains and, like all men, can recall them to mind and name them for what they are. *What he doesn't do is regard those hurts as resource to be stored up for future use.* This "storing up" of hurt can take all sorts of forms, including brooding, resentment, bitterness, unforgiveness and even a vengeful spirit.

Like everything people hold onto, *they keep their storehouse of offenses and injuries because they instinctively – if not consciously – believe it will provide a benefit to them.* And, not unexpectedly, the psychological dynamics of the perceived usefulness of hurts reflect the dynamics of the ways they are stored.

- Where such hurts and offenses are retained as a matter of resentment and bitterness, they allow the offended party to justify as right and just his condemnation of those who've offended him.
- Similarly, storing up affronts and offenses affords a person a reservoir of hurt and pain which he can draw upon to vindicate any sense of victimization that he might have. (Victimization is immensely useful to people, for it allows them to rationalize virtually any sort of failure, sin, or personal irresponsibility.) So also a storehouse of injuries and injustices (real and perceived) provides a ready reinforcement for people's inherent self-righteousness and their rationalization of an unforgiving, rancorous or even hostile attitude toward others.
- And where hurts and affronts are held onto in a spirit of retribution, they are useful in keeping the offended person's passion for vengeance and commitment to it alive and strong.

Though they may not be consciously aware of it, it is nonetheless true that people instinctively fill up and safeguard a storehouse of personal offenses and hurts because it is useful to them. At bottom, it serves the intrinsic human self-centric perspective of "me versus you" in which distinctions are occasions for ranking and self-exaltation. People naturally set themselves above others – in their thoughts and concerns if not in their actions, and "keeping an account of wrongs suffered" is eminently suited to that orientation, for it gives them one more basis for distinguishing themselves as superior to others:

They wouldn't do what others have done to them, and the fact that they've stood up under mistreatment encourages their self-congratulation. They believe they have grounds to congratulate and console themselves, and so also the right to condemn and spurn – and even retaliate against – those who've mistreated them.

People store up offenses because they allow them to legitimize their attitudes and actions toward their offenders. When they are provoked they tell themselves that it is out of concern for what is right and just, and so justify their responses (inward and outward) as appropriate to the demands of righteousness. One of the more common "righteous" responses is what Thiselton calls *moral blackmail*. This "blackmail" can be as subtle as aloof detachment or "silent treatment" or as overt as complete withdrawal or "response in kind." Paul knew all too well that love does not exempt a person from injustice and hurt – it actually invites them. But he also knew that love triumphs over injury; though it unjustly suffers injury, love refuses to keep an account of it because it will not be bound over to it.