

Do Not Provoke One Another
Galatians 5:22-26

It happens all too often. I would suggest it's an inherent trait in adolescents. It's vacation time and you're driving down the road in the family station wagon or sedan. Your trip will take a few hours and so you settle in behind the wheel. The glare of the sun is dulled by the Ray Ban's perched on the bridge of your nose. Background music provides a soft rhythm to help you ease into vacation mode. Mile by mile the cares of home and work seem to roll off your shoulders as you begin to unwind. Your wife is seated next to you occupying her mind and hands by knitting or thumbing through the latest issue of Family Circle Magazine or engrossed in her novel. Occasionally she glances up to see where you are. She may make a comment or two about an article or a delicious sounding recipe, but then returns to what has been occupying her time. Johnny and Suzie brought toys and coloring books to keep them busy on the trip. They are quiet and seem content – for now.

An hour into the trip little Suzie whines from the back seat. If you have kids you have heard it too, in one form or another. She complains that Johnny keeps poking her. Johnny defends his actions with a rebuttal stating that Suzie won't keep her dolls on her side of the seat. She has crossed the imaginary line that has been drawn down the center of the seat. He is antagonizing her.

And so it begins. Somehow a secret manual made its way into the wagon laying out the battle plan to goad each other into some sort of retaliation.

It happens at home too. Billy is playing quietly with his toys in the living room, maybe building a tower out of blocks. Or he may be right in the middle of an intense moment with his action figures. Conrad happens to be walking through where Billy is playing. He reaches out and knocks over the blocks or takes one of the action figures.

It happens on the shop floor, the basketball court, and in shopping centers, egging others on to retaliate by doing something that is also wrong.

We call it pushing each other's buttons. We know just how to get under the skin, to needle a reaction out of someone else, to push them over the edge. The Bible has another name for it – provocation, and it's found in our text for today. I invite you to turn to Galatians 5:22-26 where first I want to look at a combative nature. But stand with me in honor of God's Word as I read our passage.

I. A COMBATIVE NATURE – v. 26

Today I would like to begin at the back end of our text. Verse 26 gives us the admonition we are considering today. From it we read that we are not to provoke one another. Additionally our text adds that we are not to envy one another. I think that oftentimes provocation and envy go together. Envy is often the catalyst that stirs up feelings which causes one person to provoke someone else.

Before we go any further, we ought to define the word provoke. The Greek word Paul has chosen to use here is only used once in the New Testament. The English word shows up in other passages but does not have the same meaning. For example, the English word provoke appears in Hebrews 10:24: "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works".

In this particular case the word means to spur on or to encourage or motivate each other to love one another and do good works for one another.

A student can be provoked to improve in a class. An athlete can be provoked to greater athletic achievement. Someone may be urged to start a business. It's a nudge in the right direction. Sometimes it's a nudge to confront and confess sin with the idea of repentance and restoration like Nathan and David.

Another Greek word means to embitter.

Another means to rouse to anger.

Another means to stir up to wrath with the idea of revenge.

Still another means to provoke to jealousy.

The word Paul uses here in our text has a specific meaning of calling forth as to a contest or battle. It insinuates a stirring up of evil in another person.

When we look at the context of the chapter Paul speaks about the contrast between the old nature and the nature God's Spirit is developing in the Christian. As Paul uses the word he is talking about one person challenging someone else to go against the character being developed in the Christian by provoking them to do wrong, to revert back to the traits of the old nature.

vs. 17-21

I think about a special needs student who rode our bus. Older kids on the bus would provoke him to use profanity.

I read it in the police blotter section of the newspaper. A parent was teaching the children to shoplift.

We see it all too often in the news. There's a rally of some kind. It doesn't matter what it is. Let's say it's an anti-abortion rally. Those who are pro-choice know it's going on and where it will be held, so a group of them show up. They carry signs and take up a chant to antagonize those at the rally.

They engage them with taunts and jeers. They push and push the other side challenging them to a battle of words. Sometimes it erupts in physical assault. They know which buttons to push.

Perhaps the best example of this is found in Matthew 4:1-11.

Jesus is faced with three specific temptations, temptations the devil uses in an attempt to provoke

Jesus to sin in some way.

“Jesus, you're hungry. Just for a moment think about yourself and your need for a change. Turn these stones into bread.”

It's not just about satisfying a basic need through divine intervention. The devil was saying that hunger and deity shouldn't coexist. It was a call to doubt God's Word and if Jesus was God surely it wasn't beyond reason to meet His own need. It's like the guy who has a million bucks in the bank but is starving because he won't take any out to buy groceries. He has the means but fails to use them. It's essentially the same taunt the crowd uttered when Jesus hung on the cross – “if you're God, then come down from there.”

Failing at that the devil took Jesus to high point on the Temple and taunted Him about the Father's love and power. If Jesus threw Himself off the Temple would God protect His Son with the help of angels? “Prove that God loves you. Step off and see how fast God reacts.”

There are at least two reasons Jesus didn't comply. The first is that no matter what you do, people will never be satisfied. They'll always want more. Throughout His ministry Jesus showed many signs to authenticate who He was but people were never satisfied. They always clamored for another sign. The *second* reason is that to test God is to doubt God. Why do we think God should have to prove Himself?

Satan wanted Jesus to put God to the test. It failed.

The third temptation was to provoke Jesus to take the kingdom early and avoid the cross. All Jesus had to do was worship Satan. He wanted Jesus to accept the kingdom on his terms not God's.

That passage gives us an idea of what Paul is driving at. Don't provoke others to do wrong. Matthew 18:1-7

Jesus specifically had children in mind here speaks of moral or spiritual stumbling. It means to cause to fall referring to enticing, trapping, or influencing a believer in any way that would lead them to do some sin.

John MacArthur notes that “A person who is responsible for causing a Christian to sin commits an offense against Christ Himself as well as against the Christian.”

The graphic nature of Jesus’ illustration describes the serious nature of such an act. He says it would be better for that person to have a millstone tied around his neck and tossed into the sea. This stone weighed hundreds of pounds and was the upper stone used in grinding. Sometimes Romans executed a prisoner by tying a heavy stone around the neck of a prisoner and throwing them overboard to drown.

In Revelation 2:14 Jesus condemned the church in Pergamum because it tolerated the teaching of Balaam who told King Balak how he could entice the Israelites to sin.

Then in 2:20 He condemned the church in Thyatira for tolerating the sin of Jezebel.

We can be guilty of directly provoking someone to do wrong or we can do so indirectly by tolerating it, saying it isn’t so bad, allowing it to continue unhindered.

I can provoke Robyn to sin by suggesting to her when doing our taxes that we add a deduction we don’t qualify for in order to pad the refund.

We can cause someone to sin by provoking them to cheat on an exam or pad a business expense report.

We can cause someone to sin by being a bad example. We don’t even have to say a word; all they have to do is watch and then follow.

We can provoke a weaker Christian to stumble by following our example when they are still under conviction because of their own immature consciences about something. It may not be sinful in and of itself, but it becomes a sin when the weaker Christian goes against his conscience.

We can provoke another believer to do wrong by getting them to stir up dissention in the church.

We can provoke another believer to do wrong by getting them to spread gossip or rumors about someone.

A believer should never provoke another believer to do wrong. It is a grave sin indeed for such a person who provokes someone else to sin.

A pastor shared the story of a young man in his handicap ministry who came to him confessing that he had gotten drunk. He felt so guilty about it and wanted to confess it. Come to find out his brother and some friends forced him to drink alcohol and got him drunk. The real sin wasn’t him getting drunk but on those who forced him to get drunk.

When we provoke someone else to sin, we are in danger of God’s judgment. Paul’s critics were accusing him of preaching a message that would either lead people into lawlessness or license – that they were free to do whatever they wanted rather than to bring them to godliness. The problem is, the godliness these critics were touting was based on keeping traditions that man had devised.

Our task as the body of Christ is to look out for the welfare of each other, to nurture each other to grow in faith.

So what is the answer? Paul outlines it for us in our text. From it we see a Christ-like nature.

II. A CHRIST-LIKE NATURE – v. 22-23

The word “fruit” here should be taken as singular, or as a whole, not nine separate characteristics. It’s one fruit, not nine different ones. These traits are produced in the believer at the same time by the Holy Spirit, but while they are produced in us at the same time that does not mean they are fully developed in us. As we grow in our Christian faith these characteristics ought to become more evident as we yield more of our lives to the Holy Spirit. They are the evidence of a changed heart that came when we confessed our sin and trusted in Christ as Savior. When others see these characteristics in us and increasing over time, it should be evidence to them that we are saved.

Now Paul demonstrates that the fruit of the Spirit is in direct contrast to the nature of the flesh. There should be a marked difference between my new nature in Christ and the old nature without Christ. II Corinthians 5:17 says that in Christ I am a new creation, old things have passed away.

This new nature is produced only by the Holy Spirit and cannot be produced by any effort on our part, even by attempting to live by the Law. These Christian virtues being developed in us are a direct attack against the sin nature. As these are growing in us, we should see the sin nature being defeated.

Jesus said something else that is important to remember in John 15. Three times He said He wants us to bear fruit, more fruit and much fruit, but He made it clear that unless we are attached to the vine (referring to Himself), we will bear no fruit. The key word in that verse is the word “abide”, a word that means to remain in. The general idea Christ wants to convey is that if the Christian is apart from Him, we cannot bear fruit.

The late Dr. John Walvoord, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary referring to the fruit of the Spirit wrote “In an ultimate sense this ‘fruit’ is simply the life of Christ lived out in a Christian.”

I’m not going to spend a lot of time on these nine virtues but just to highlight them. But at the end of the day we need to ask ourselves after reading this list, how evident is this fruit in me? Am I allowing the Holy Spirit to develop this fruit or am I putting up some resistance?

Love – this we know to be unconditional love that is only from God, a love that completely gives of itself for another without expecting anything in return.

I think about a mother caring for an infant. That child can’t do a thing for itself. It is totally dependent on the mother. Day in and day out that mother tirelessly, oops, ceaselessly, gives of herself to that child. After having the millionth diaper changed or the thousandth time being fed, the child is not going to look into the loving eyes of her mother and tell her that because of everything she has done to care for her needs, she’ll get a million bucks. It isn’t going to happen. The mother loves the child without expectation of getting anything in return from that child.

Love is giving a cold cup of water to someone who hates us.

Love is helping a coworker out even though they tried to destroy our reputation, doing everything they could to sabotage our career.

Every characteristic described here comes from the Spirit is an outgrowth of love, that’s why it’s listed first. Paul said that the greatest is love. Without love there will be no joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control.

John writes that love is the mark of a Christian.

I John 3:14 “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.”

I John 4:7-8 “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

Love is the foundational character trait, the key to the other fruit being developed in us. If we live motivated by God's love being developed in us through the work of the Holy Spirit then selfish ambition characterized by the sinful nature will become less evident.

Joy – This is an inward peace not determined by outward circumstances.

“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”

Philippians 4:10-20

John 15:11 “I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

Nehemiah 8:10 “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Some of you have gone through some incredibly difficult life events, some of you are going through them right now, and some of you have yet to go through them. All of us at one time or another and perhaps many times will experience some difficult life circumstances.

The loss of a job

The loss of a loved one

The loss of an income

The loss of a marriage

An injury

An illness

Persecution for your faith

The list is really endless

Joy is what prompted Paul and Silas to sing while in prison.

It took martyrs to the stake or the colosseum.

If we are allowing the Spirit to work in us, to develop His fruit, joy will prevail in spite of the trouble we experience. Do others see this joy?

Peace – This is different from joy. Whereas I see joy as something expressed, peace is a tranquility of heart during the difficult troubles we encounter. The verb form has the idea of binding together. We

might say that the person expressing peace has it all together. They don't let trials get them down, but always seem to have a settled mind.

Philippians 4:6-7 helps us see that the peace of God guards our heart from things that may otherwise cause us to worry. This comes when we give to Him all our prayers and petitions. That verse says the key to such peace is giving thanks for those requests that we leave with Him.

Isaiah 26:3 suggests that such peace comes because we trust Him. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.”

“You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in You, whose thoughts are fixed on You!” (NLT)

Hebrews 12:3

In John 14:27 Jesus said He would give us His peace. Jesus had peace when He slept in the stern of the storm ridden boat. Peace is what we will have when we trust God with our whole heart. Peace eliminates fear when we know He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. We experience His peace because we know He is with us every step of the way.

Longsuffering/Patience – It's a compound word meaning long and temper. We know what a short tempered person is like. So a long tempered person is the opposite, someone who has a lot of patience or endurance with others. He is able to bear long with them and endure through the injuries others may inflict on him without thought of retaliation.

It was part of Paul's prayer for the Colossian church that might be “strengthened with all power according to [God's] glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience...” (1:11) In 3:12 he encouraged them to be “clothed with...patience.”

Kindness – This is goodness of heart, suggesting benevolence in action or a tender concern for others. Jesus spoke of this about Himself.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and 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.” Matthew 11:29-30

Thinking back over Jesus’ ministry Peter spoke of Jesus going about doing good. (Acts 10:38)

It was in kindness that Jesus called the children to come to Him or to treat those with infirmities.

Bernard of Clairvaux summed it up nicely in his hymn *Jesus the very thought of Thee*.

O Hope of every contrite heart,
O Joy of all the meek,
To those who fall how kind Thou art!
How good to those who seek!

Goodness – This word speaks of moral and spiritual excellence. It’s a word that is used in Matthew 1:19 to describe Joseph who was a just and righteous man. The news is filled with the wicked acts of man’s hatred toward others. The world today needs Christians to rise up and exhibit a righteousness that can only be attributed to his abiding in Christ. We need the church to rise up and display goodness. The church is called to put off those old characteristics and put on the new nature.

Faithfulness – Trustworthiness, reliability. Because of God’s great faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22-23) we are able to demonstrate this quality because of God’s Spirit. Faithfulness for a Christian means that when we give our word, we keep it.

Gentleness – This is the word for meekness, but does not mean weak. Jesus was meek, but He was by no means weak. Aristotle defined it as the

“midpoint between excessive proneness to anger and incapacity for anger.”

In effect it is strength under control or the right use of power and authority.

Warren Wiersbe writes: “A meek (or gentle) Christian does not throw his weight around.”

A nurse I worked with in hospice also boarded horses at her farm. One of the horses she had was a retired race horse. Though still fairly young this horse had to be retired because of some kind of injury. She said that one day she took the horse out for a ride and she could feel the muscles in the horse ready to let loose, but the horse restrained itself. It had the power, but held it in check.

Self-control – It means self-mastering. Here it relates to the curbing of fleshly desires, a restraining of passions and desires. But it is not just a restraint of things that we should not do, it can also be a restraint in doing things that are ok, something we enjoy, but that we allow to consume us. Work is good but we may need to have self-control so that it doesn’t consume our time or thoughts. Hobbies are good but we should guard against spending so much time with them that we ignore other things or time with God.

These are the character traits the Holy Spirit is developing in us. Paul says there isn’t any law against them. There may be laws written against certain acts of the old nature like murder or anger or drunkenness, but no laws are required to govern the fruit of the Spirit because they are the very virtues God desires to develop in us. The Holy Spirit is working to develop these Christ-like characteristics in us.

But they cannot be developed in us if first we do not have a crucified nature.

III. A CRUCIFIED NATURE – vs. 24-25

Earlier in this letter (2:20) Paul said that we have been crucified with Christ meaning that in His death we have also died, died to the ruling power of sin. In 6:14 Paul said that we have died to the world. We have been freed from its grip. Even though the power of the old nature and the world has been defeated we still feel the effects of its allurements. The key in overcoming them is found in v. 25 – the old nature will have less pull on us when we live by the Spirit and walk in step with the Spirit. In v. 16 we are told that when we walk in the Spirit we won't fulfill the cravings of the old nature.

We sometimes want to run ahead of the Spirit or we lag behind and that's when we get into trouble.

I love to watch track and field meets. It has a great appeal to me. I like watching the relay teams warm up. The four runners are all lined up one behind the other about a step apart. They jog around the infield in step with each other. The runner with the baton gives a command and the runner in front of him reaches back and takes the baton. He will then do the same thing. They practice this over and over and over to get synchronized so that when it comes to the race they know the command to begin sprinting and when to take the baton. Races are won or lost at the exchange. I have seen the runner with the baton pass the runner who is to receive the baton. I have seen the runner who is to receive the baton start off too early and miss the exchange.

If we are going to see the fruit of the Spirit developed in us, if we are going to effectively overcome the old nature, we must be in step with the Holy Spirit, letting Him do His work in us.

Effectually we do that by reading, studying, and obeying God's Word. Listening to when God speaks to us in it and then doing it. James writes that we are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. Otherwise we are only deceiving ourselves. We need to submit our heart and mind to them. When we do that we will benefit, our families will

benefit, and the church will benefit. We will become a visible witness to a watching world. Instead of seeing provocation, they will see the power of God's Spirit in us producing what can only come from His divine work in us.

I want to give you one parting thought. If we are not walking by the Spirit, we are living after the flesh. Jesus said it a bit differently, and you know He's always right, you cannot serve two masters. If His fruit is growing in us, we won't provoke one another and it won't matter if someone crosses the imaginary line in seat.