

## Reciprocity and Sensitivity

“Reciprocity” refers to the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit; especially, and in a more legal sense, privileges granted by one country or organization to another. But the concept also has application to *sensitivities* pertaining to the use of our tongues and ears.... and by extension, our minds and hearts.

There is no doubt that we have an obligation to be not only cognizant of but careful with the sensitivities of others in the use of our tongues (the words we choose and how we utilize them). James 3 highlights both the proclivity and power of such for either *destructive* (vv.1-12) or *edifying* (vv.13-18) ends.

Thus, maintaining keen control of the tongue is not only wise for us personally, but also enables its profitable use towards and for the benefit of others. Paul highlighted such to the Ephesians thusly, “*Let no unwholesome word proceed out of your mouth, but only such as is good according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those that hear,*” Ephesians 4:29.

Obviously, then, *sensitivity* is of paramount importance in how we choose to use this powerful tool, since it can be used to *build up* or to *tear down*. For the last decade or two, much emphasis has been placed upon our words and how we use them from both spiritual and cultural sources. But what about our ears? Does *sensitivity* also have application to what and how we hear? Of course it does, but perhaps not in just the ways you imagine...

If we’re going to expect more *sensitivity* with regard to what and how words are utilized, ought not fair reciprocity dictate that we are willing to listen with less *sensitivity*? Please consider carefully Paul’s admonitions regarding the characteristics of true, biblical, divine *love* when he writes that “*it does not seek its own, is not provoked*” and “*does not take into account a wrong suffered,*” 1Corinthians 13:5. Note three separate but related qualities of love:

- “*it does not seek its own*”- True love refuses to make things, let alone *everything*, “about me.” Instead, it seeks the best interest of *its object*, rather than *self*.
- “*is not provoked*”- The KJV says it is not “*easily*” provoked. True love is not looking for something about which to be offended. Offences and provocations occur (regrettably) frequently enough without one seeking occasions to be *offended* or *provoked*.
- “*does not take into account a wrong suffered*”- True love does not “keep score” of indiscretions, especially for the purpose of dredging them up later as a mace and chain to further bludgeon the offender, or as a shield for our own transgressions.

Now stop and think for a moment. In these ways at least, is Paul saying that we should be *more* or *less* sensitive if divine love is our modus operandi? While James 3 clearly demands that we should be *more* sensitive in the use of our *tongues* (and *minds*), isn’t Paul suggesting that we should be *less* sensitive in the use of our *ears* (and *hearts*)?

While we should all (especially *preachers/teachers* like me!) be *more* sensitive in the use of our tongues and minds, we should also be *less* sensitive in the use of our *ears* and *hearts*. How so?

1. We need to stop making everything about ourselves. Stop being offended on behalf of someone else who may or may not actually be offended by what you perceive to be an offence. Being a “third-party offende,” if such is actually even possible, doesn’t make you more sensitive, it makes you a “*busybody*,” cf. 1Timothy 5:13; 1Peter 4:14-16.

2. Stop looking for reasons to be offended. Try to put the *best* possible construction upon others' intentions, words, and actions rather than the worst one. If you constantly look for reasons to be offended, you'll find them, certainly. Such doesn't make you more sensitive, it makes you arrogant, vain, and temperamental rather than *temperate*, cf. 1Timothy 3:11; Titus 2:2.
3. Stop keeping score of offences. Even if you are genuinely and personally offended by sin (getting your feelings hurt or your sensitivities ignored doesn't necessarily mean sin has occurred), you have one of two choices: either approach the offender personally and explain their sin to them, Matthew 18:15-20; or, let it go, Matthew 5:38-42; 1Corinthians 6:1-8.

We should all strive to be *more* sensitive in how we think, feel, treat, and speak to others. God help me, I know I need to do much better in this area. But we also should strive to be *less* sensitive to how others think, feel, treat, and speak to us. Not only are these things according to God's Word as we've seen above, we and those with whom we have to do in this life will be much happier, contented, and peaceful if our *tongues* (and minds) are more sensitive in regard to giving offence to others, and our *ears* (and hearts) are less sensitive to being offended ourselves. This is reciprocity for mutual **benefit**. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))