

The Glory and Grace of Not Grumbling

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

There was a farmer who had a complaining wife. From morning till night she would complain about something or the other. The only time he got relief was when he went to the farm with his donkey. One day as he was plowing, his wife brought him lunch. He put the donkey in the shade of a tree and began to have his lunch. Immediately, his wife began her complaining. All of a sudden the donkey lashed out with both hind feet, hit her, and killed her on the spot.

At the funeral, the pastor noticed something odd. When women would come, the farmer would listen for a minute, nod his head in agreement, but when men approached him, he would listen for a minute and shook his head in disagreement. This was so consistent that the pastor decided to ask him about it.

After the burial the pastor asked him as to why he nodded his head in agreement to the women but always shook his head in disagreement with all men. The farmer said, "The women would come up and say something nice about my wife -- how she cooked, how good she was and so on. I'd nod my head in agreement."

"And what about the men?" the pastor asked.

"The men knew that the donkey killed my wife and all they wanted to know was if my donkey was for sale." Source: <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/83304/complaining-by-shine-thomas>

The Bible certainly has verses about the complaining wife, and it has enough verses about the contentious, angry man. Those are really versions of each other: the male and female version of people who murmur, complain and dispute in nearly all things.

When you meet a complaining, murmuring person like that, it is hard to cure them. Something seems fundamentally slanted towards the unhappy, the negative, the discontent. But complaining, murmuring and discontent is not just a personality trait. It's not just a "you're a glass-half-empty" kind of person. No, murmuring and complaining is a posture towards life, an overall belief about God and the world. Murmuring and complaining has deep implications for our Christian testimony. It affects not just our mood, but the reputation of Christ.

After explaining to us in verses 12 and 13 how we are to live the Christian life, Paul now adds a quality to our obedience. In verses 12 and 13 he told us about grace working in us and our faith working out from us. But now in this passage Paul gives us an incredibly simple, and yet almost impossibly high standard for our obedience. This one command or quality added to our obedience will bring three incredible results. One command in verse 14, three consequences that follow.

I. The Command: Do All Your Obedience Without Complaining and Disputing

Do all things without complaining and disputing,

What does Paul mean by this? Let's take those two words, complaining and disputing. The first of them is a word which means to say something in a low tone of voice, which means mumbling under your breath, behind-the-back comments. It means to complain, to murmur, to grumble. This would include out-loud in your face, or out-loud behind your back, or within my own heart. I can murmur and grumble and complain in my mind.

The second word means to dispute, to argue. It is to take issue with everything, to protest, to disagree no matter what, to pick out and find a fault or an issue or a problem. This is the backchat, the chronic fault-finding, the incessant negativity.

Paul says, go about your life, doing all your obedience without complaining and disputing. Don't mumble, grumble, pout, groan, complain, moan, whine, gripe, whinge, mutter, protest, argue, fuss, sulk, or otherwise have a negative attitude. That includes your spouse, your children, your parents, your siblings. It includes your fellow-Christians. It includes the schoolwork. The work you are given at work. The assignments handed to you. Your service at church. Your chores at home, the housework, the shopping, the meals, the cleaning, the disciplining, the chores, the traffic, the medical, the health and fitness, you name it, it is supposed to be unspoilt, untouched by complaining and fighting.

Now really, Paul, can we not have just a bit of leeway, here? Just a bit of complaining? Just a small, harmless amount? Paul says, do all things without complaining and disputing. No grumbling, moaning, no fussing, no backchatting, no whining, no pouting, no sulking, no surliness, no moodiness about it, no irritable anger about it. In fact, there is even a Yiddish word for complaining: kvetching. None of that.

“Complaining is like bad breath, you notice it when it comes out of somebody else's mouth, but not your own.”—Will Bowen

And as that begins to seem like an impossible ask, just think for a moment about the Lord Jesus. Try to imagine Him in His earthly life harassed by people, surrounded by slow-learners, harassed by opponents. Can you imagine Him grumbling about His lot in life, pouting about the unfair Pharisees, complaining about the crowds, moaning about His workload? No, the chances are, we cannot. Why not? Because we know those things don't go with holiness. But at the same time, complaining is so part of our lives, it seems unimaginable to be without it.

So let's try to qualify it. When are we really sinfully complaining? Are we never to say a negative word ever again? Can we not complain about bad service or bad food at the restaurant? Can we never tell another person about our troubles without it being sinful complaining? Can we never criticise something or someone without it being murmuring or complaining?

Clearly it is no sin to point out error: Jesus and the apostles did that. It is no sin to raise a grievance to the appropriate law enforcement or authority if you have been wronged. It isn't wrong to tell a business about its bad service since you're paying for it. It is not sin to correct a child or an employee or another person, by pointing out the negative: what has been done wrong. Murmuring and complaining is not simply because something negative is on our lips.

Murmuring and complaining has the quality of sinful anger, and unbelieving discontent. When we murmur, pout, complain, we are really removing God from our worldview, and then expressing a proud and discontented disdain for life. At the back of all murmuring is an “I deserve” attitude, an “I am entitled to” view of life. So what is really lurking behind murmuring is proud, unbelieving independence. I'm supposed to have. I ought to have. Why is it this way?

Paul is about to quote Deuteronomy 32:15, so he is almost certainly thinking about the Israelites and their complaining in the Exodus. They complained and Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:9–10 ()

⁹nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.”

Why was God so angry at their complaining? Well, when the food is bad at a restaurant, who do you complain to? Who's responsible? The manager. When you don't like the service in a shop, who do you complain to? The manager. He's responsible. When you don't like what is happening to you in life in general, and you complain, where is that complaint lodged? Oh, I know you may not directly complain to God, but when we fuss and pout and grumble about life, we are lodging a complaint with the One who oversees our life. And in fact, murmuring usually says, implicitly at least, “I deserve better service in this life than I'm getting. This is a pretty shabby life I've been given.” Murmuring is an act of rebellion. It is giving God a one-star rating, and commenting: “Terrible world. Won't waste my time here again.” Murmuring is unbelief.

You see, we can expose error, give correction, critique things for improvement, disagree in the home or church or work, and work through that, we can call for better service in a righteous way, if our hearts are still filled with gratitude to God. I can tell another believer of all my troubles and pains, if my heart is still full of hope in God, expectation of His deliverance. Put simply a believer is to do all things with God in the picture: God is in control, God has allowed this, what God ordains is good, God is growing me and testing me. A believer wears a thick insulated vest called Christian contentment, and when the cold winds of bad treatment, and disappointed hopes, and multiplying problems, and unrelenting stresses blow on him: he can pray, he can weep, he can plead, he can hope, he can endure, but as long as that vest is on, he cannot murmur. Feel pain, yes, wish it were different, yes, do lawful things to change it, yes. But for obedience to be obedience, it must be done in faith, and murmuring is not faith.

So Paul says, I want you to be totally clean of murmuring. None of it. Repent of it. Confess it every time you do it. You may need to do that 100 times in a day when you start noticing how much you do it. But steadily, as you replace it with gratitude and prayer, you will be putting off the old man, and be putting on the new.

By the way, when is a good time to start teaching this? How old should your child be before you start insisting that complaining, murmuring, whining, pouting, fussing is not allowed? When they're four? Fourteen? Twenty-four? The time to start is when they start doing it. You train them away from fussing when infants, and then explain that complaining is sin when they are old enough to understand.

Now, if we do that, I want you to see the consequences.

II. We Will Give a Clear Contrast to the World

that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation

If you do all things without murmuring and complaining, you will become blameless, harmless, faultless children of God. Obviously Paul does not mean you will become children of God for the first time. He means, as children of God, you will now grow into being blameless, harmless, faultless in your public testimony before others. This is rather like on the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says that if we love our enemies **Mat 5:45** "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. **Eph 5:1** Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.

Christians who don't murmur are blameless. No one can say, "You're just as guilty as us! We hate the boss, and hate our living conditions, and we hate our government, and we hate our lives, and you're one of us! You always said so!" No, the non-murmuring Christian is blameless.

Harmless doesn't mean weak and ineffectual. It comes from a word meaning unmixed, pure.

Christians are not double-minded, double-tongued, two-faced. When we don't murmur, there is a simplicity about our lives: we believe our God is in control and we are not wrestling with our authorities.

Without fault means unblemished. Murmuring begins to pollute and stain our testimony. These three words are not separate ideas. They mean that non-murmuring Christians have a clean, pure testimony as being different. We provide the world with a contrast. We are not faking it, or hiding some other agenda. We have simply embraced life under God, and live it with genuine gratitude, hope and contentment.

Now that is something the world does not have and does not understand. Paul calls the world a crooked and perverse generation. Both these words mean twisted, deformed, bent, warped, perverse. The world is twisted and crooked in their thinking and judgements. They interpret life in a completely muddled up and distorted way. Their loves and desires and reasoning is twisted, unreasonable, messed up. Consequently, their lives are riddled with discontent, envy, murmuring, war, disputing, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition. It's dog eat dog, eat or be eaten. And for them, life is cruel, unfair, meaningless, and hopeless.

Now when the unbeliever comes to you and starts muttering about how life is cruel, unfair, meaningless and hopeless, and you, as a Christian, say, "Yah. I agree.", we've just lost the opportunity to be blameless, harmless, faultless. We had the opportunity to be children of God in the midst of a twisted generation, but in that moment, we just blended in with the crooked generation.

Try it. As the unbeliever (or even the professing believer) begins murmuring, respond with a statement of gratitude to God, or hope in God, or contentment in God. You will either make the person angry (because he or she wanted you to agree and join in with the murmuring and validate it), or you will bring conviction and curiosity. What makes you so hopeful, so thankful, so satisfied? Did you just win the lottery? Are you floating on Prozac or inhaling "medical marijuana"? Or are you just deluded?

You're not responsible for convincing everyone in every conversation. You are responsible to provide a contrast by not murmuring.

Closely related to providing a clear contrast to the world, the second thing we will do if we don't murmur is that

III. We Will Give Centrality to the Word

among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life

Paul expects the Philippians and us to be lights. In fact, the word means stars. Paul is very likely thinking of Daniel 12:3:

³ Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever. (Dan. 12:3)

Believers provide pinpoints of light in a sea of darkness. In all the chaos of unbelief and sin, like sailors lost at sea, believers are a lighthouse. Light provides guidance, it provides the ability to

orient yourself, it provides comfort, it provides warmth. How do we supply this light?

When we hold fast, or hold forth the Word of Life. There is some debate over whether the Greek word here is hold fast as in hold tight, or hold forth, as in proclaim. But really, the one leads to the other. If you hold fast to the truth and doctrine of the Word, you can then hold it forth. If you hold it forth, then you must be learning it and holding fast to it.

The Bible is the Word of Life. It explains what life is, what life is for, how to have life.

We can be lights if we provide the world with truth. And we can only do that if we drink this in, and then hold it forth.

Now once again, this all goes back to not murmuring. When we refuse unbelieving murmuring and disputing, we provide a clear contrast to the world. We've marked ourselves as not belonging to this generation. Now some people will get angry and storm off. Paul told us that a consistent Christian testimony will always smell one of two ways.

¹⁵For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. ¹⁶To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.” “2 Corinthians 2:15–16 You are either a sweet smell of the life they want, or the stench of the death they refuse to embrace. But for those who smell life in your attitude, there will be an interest that is provoked by our hope, or gratitude, or contentment. 1 Peter 3:15 ¹⁵But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Sometimes we want to give out the message, but we have not really become interesting as messengers. We want to give out the answer, but the people haven't been provoked to ask the question.

But the other extreme is when you have got their attention, and they begin to lean in and try to find out what you have that they don't, and then you hide your light under a bushel. Instead of then teaching truth from Scripture, and explaining your hope, you just shrug and put it down to being a positive person, looking on the bright side. No, hold fast and hold forth the Word of Life.

IV. We Will Give Comfort to Weary Christians

so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Paul says, if you obey without murmuring, then you will be a clear contrast to the world, and so you will highlight and hold forth the Word to them like lights in the darkness, and that will be for me a deep sense of joy and accomplishment on the day of judgement. When I see that you became faithful witnesses, a genuine Christian light in the darkness, then I will know that all my running and working (two images for Paul's pastoral ministry) was not empty or futile. I didn't do it for nothing.

When do Christians feel most discouraged? Probably when they feel that what they are pouring in to other's lives has had no effect. To pray, and teach others, and be an example, and serve, and then have those people just slide into the world, just blend back in, or just live a worldly life with no contrast, no difference, no light is discouraging. But to know that you helped another believer not just become a believer, but become a clear believer, an outstanding believer, a witness to others, that brings comfort and joy. 3 John 4: ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

When you choose to not murmur or complain, you are being a contrast, and giving the word centre-stage, but you may very well be bringing joy and comfort to another Christian who is watching. For a Christian parent, this is true. It is natural for sinners to complain and argue and fuss. But when your children give thanks in adversity, or display contentment during loss, or show that they are happy in Christ and don't covet the world, then this is a sign of grace, evidence of God's work, and it brings huge comfort and joy to a parent.

But let's return to our main command, and close with a few words on how. How do we not complain, when it has become an entrenched habit? Well, remember the J-Curve of Philippians? We die with Christ, so as to rise with him. We come to something our flesh wants to complain about. We want to vent, or argue, or fuss, or take it out on someone. To not do that, I have to die to that. I have to trust that Christ's way of gratitude, thanksgiving and contentment is the right way. For a few moments, it doesn't feel good. It feels like death, like weakness, like something is dying. I want to fuss, I want to express my disdain, I want to reject what God has handed me. But I don't. I go down with Jesus on the cross, and die to those sins of murmuring and complaining.

But then I come up. I rise, and in that I have some of the joy of contentment, the joy of gratitude, the joy of hope. I have clarity to see the situation better, and now I can address it properly: maybe I can change it, maybe I can't, but I can be a blameless, harmless, faultless child of God in the middle of a wicked and twisted generation who are filled with unthankfulness.

I can't control whether there will be pain, suffering, unpleasantness, or some form of unhappy circumstance. I can control if I respond with murmuring and complaining. In Christ, in His Spirit, in His cross, I can be different.