

**Text:** Philippians 2:14-18

**Title:** No Complaining!

**Truth:** God is working in us so that we would be good Christians and bright lights shining in a dark world.

**Date/Location:** Sunday Jan 30 and Feb 6, 2022 at FBC (rev. summer 2010)

## Introduction

The apostle now is going to spell out some details about what it looks like to obey God's word, which is the same thing as working out our salvation with fear and trembling. The next exhortations certainly fit the context of humility and like-mindedness, but they are even broader than that, encompassing all that we do in our lives.

### I. No Complaining! v. 14

The sinful activities of complaining and disputing, grumbling and arguing can be internally mental or, very often, externally verbal.

A. **Complaining:** The Greek dictionary BDAG says "an utterance made in a low tone of voice, behind-the-scenes talk." It can also mean *murmuring* (the word sounds like the activity), secret talk, whispering usually behind other people, *grumbling*, arising from some dissatisfaction. Examples are found in:

1. John 7:12, grumbling about the identity and character of Jesus;
2. Acts 6:1, complaint of the Greek widows;
3. 1 Peter 4:9, offering hospitality without complaining;
4. Luke 15:2, 19:7 (cognate verb), where the Pharisees and scribes grumbled that Jesus received sinners at ate with them.
5. Exodus 15:23-24, 16:2, 7, 8, 9, 12, complaints about God's (lack of or slow) provision of water or food;
6. Num. 14:2, 36; 16:11, Deut. 1:27, complaints about Moses' leadership and the promised land.
7. Joshua 9:18, Israel's complaint against its leaders when they spared Gideon, yet they were keeping a promise they had made before (in rash fashion).

The Old Testament was written in part to warn us against discontentment about the things God has provided (1 Cor.

10:6). Deut. 32:4-6 tells us how unwise God's people were in their interactions with Him. Complaining is on the far other end of the spectrum when compared to what Moses is doing in this song—praising God. Praise or complaint?

**Summary:** Complaining is a sinful expression of discontent and selfishness; it conveys displeasure or grievance. It is unhappy about what *God* has decided for you in that situation. It decides that *I* know better than God does, and *I* am not happy about the situation that *I* find myself in.

What is the opposite of complaining? How about rejoicing, praising, honoring, blessing, thanking.

B. **Arguing:** Examples include

1. Matthew 15:19 (evil thoughts);
2. Luke 2:35 (thoughts of many hearts);
3. Luke 5:22 (Jesus knew their thoughts);
4. Luke 9:46-47, an argument/dispute about who would be greatest, and Jesus knew the thoughts that drove the argument;
5. Luke 24:38, doubts;
6. Rom 1:21, thinking;
7. 1 Cor. 3:20, reasonings;
8. 1 Tim 2:8, dissension;
9. James 2:4, judges with evil thoughts.

**Summary:** This word has a wider range of meaning than the one for "complaining" but it clearly has a heavy emphasis on the thoughts of a person and particularly negative contemplations that spring forth in arguments. It has to do with reasoning that may come out verbally in a conflict situation. When there is complaining in the context, then the "reasonings" of those involved are likely focused upon it as a source of conflict.

Complaining is a sinful expression of discontent and selfishness; of displeasure or grievance. Disputing is reasoning or negative contemplations that may spring forth in arguments that come out verbally in a conflict situation. It is the sinful type of verbal exchange that occurs when conflicting ideas meet.

- C. The graces of submission, contentment, and humility help you avoid complaining and disputing. “God’s will must be \_\_\_\_\_. Therefore, I will handle it as He intends for me to handle it.”
- D. Paul says *everything* is the setting of our no-complain-or-grumble attitude. The single word “all things” in Greek covers everything. Everything we do—and that at the start of the sentence so it has emphasis—means everything. Some things are easy not to complain about. But other things are tough for us to do with a good spirit. Cleaning chores, repetitive tasks, nasty jobs, things when we are tired, hard things, uncomfortable things.
- E. Here's a thought: if you want to do everything to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), one way is to do everything without complaining or disputing. How does this apply in your home? Church?

Side note: You can raise a legitimate complaint without complaining, moaning, whining, etc.

It takes discernment that comes through careful, Bible-directed thinking about your reactions, speech, attitudes, etc. to determine whether something is a legitimate complaint or just sinful complaining. It takes practice to determine if something is a reasonable and sin-free exchange about a conflict or whether it is a sinful type of dispute. There are so many situations in which complaining and disputing may take place that each needs to be examined in light of the Bible's teaching, as the Bible is the metric as to whether something is sin or not. It is not going to be easy if you are hard-headed and insensitive to the work of the Spirit through your conscience.

So how do we define the boundary between a legitimate complaint and a complaining complaint in which sin is involved? Have you ever said to someone, “I’m just reporting, not complaining”? That is part of the idea.

We should drop complaints in our hearts before raising them outwardly because we realize that to carry them forward is just more sin, on top of what we have already done in our minds.

- F. There are better approaches than complaints and sinful debate. Try constructive criticism, or using the appropriate channels for

making changes, or confronting someone about their sin. These are much more positive things than murmuring.

## II. The Purpose: To be Bright Lights in the World, v. 15

- A. Common grace informs us that complaining and arguing are not going to get us anywhere. You might as well do something else! But with the help of revelation from God, we know that complaining and arguing is not just an unproductive way to live—it is sin and displeases God.
- B. Verse 15 is a purpose or goal statement explaining why we need to avoid complaining and arguing. Those things are blameworthy, harmful, and sinful. They accord well with the crookedness and perversity<sup>1</sup> of the society in which we live, but they do *not* agree with godliness.
- C. We are instead to become those who are blameless, harmless, upright and in harmony with God. This is our target. Are you there yet? The point is not that we start out sanctified. We end up that way, with progress along life's way. Keep moving in the right direction by obeying the Lord's command to put away sin and remember that it is God who is working in your life to do just that.
1. *Blameless* means that there is no charge sustainable against a person. Blameless does not exclude a person who sins, since he can repent, confess, make restitution if needed, and be an upright person. The issue is not “does someone sin?” but “do they sin less of the time and what do they do about it when they do?” For sure, total blamelessness would be perfection.
  2. *Harmless* means without deceit, sincere, pure, innocent.
- D. Believers are in the middle of a moral mess called the world. This should be obvious. Any believer should be able to discern the vast difference between the world and the things of God. Paul calls it a crooked and perverse generation (Deut. 32:5). These words could be translated as unscrupulous, dishonest, morally twisted, distorted, corrupt, depraved. That is what our world is.

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<sup>1</sup> Perversity is anything that opposes or contradicts God.

- E. *Crooked* comes from the word “skolios” from which we get “scoliosis” that refers to a curvature in the spine, like an S shape in extreme cases. The opposite is straight, a picture of righteousness or “how it is supposed to be.” *Perverse* is a picture of sinfulness. Put together, the idea is that the world is terribly far out of line compared to normal. It is showing a *pathology* of sinfulness.
- F. Every generation is sinful like this—we are not talking about a single generation of people, but all people alive at the time Paul wrote, who continue, through their offspring, down to this day.
- G. Our nation has enjoyed some benefits of a Christian heritage so that some of these perversities have not been as evident, but they have always been there, and they are continually trying to bubble up and push through the surface and out into the open.
- H. The backdrop of our world is all that sin and corruption, like the darkness of interstellar space. But space is punctuated by dots of light we call stars. This is akin to how the believer is supposed to shine against the backdrop of sin in the world, as a spiritual light of pure and upright character. The shining is like that of the star seen in the east by the wise men after the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2:7). The believer looks different than the backdrop against which he is placed, i.e., against the world. He stands out. He is not different for the sake of being different as in non-conformist or contrary, but different because we have a different God, a different morality, a different hope, a different lifestyle, a different Lord, different desires, etc.

Like stars in the midnight sky, believers shine as lights in a morally dark world. See Matt 5:14-16. John 8:12. This shining is not really a command. It is imperative for believers to live as lights, but genuine believers do this automatically. Many of us need some more spiritual lumens, but shining is part and parcel of being a believer. You do not hide yourself under a basket!

### **III. By Holding Firm to God’s Word, v. 16a**

- A. The verb “holding fast” has various uses but holding firm seems to be the best fit this context. It can be the idea of holding on, staying in, giving careful attention to, holding firmly, maintain a grasp on

something. The word is a participle which I take to be the means by which we can accomplish our responsibility to shine as lights.

- B. The word of life is the gospel, and by extension, the entirety of the revelation of God in the Bible.
- C. How do you shine? By holding onto the Word, which means clinging in belief to what God says in Scripture and living in obedience to that Word. Those who believe the Word obey the Word; those who disobey the Word do not believe it—no matter their protestations to the contrary.
- D. Some translate this as “holding forth” as if Paul is focusing the Philippians on the idea of evangelism as the way to shine as lights in the world. Yes, all Christians are missionaries and evangelists whether vocationally or part-time, but the point of this passage is to say that we need to **hold fast** to the Word of life, which works out practically in terms of not complaining and arguing and living blamelessly and harmlessly and faultlessly in the midst of the world. When we do that, then we are shining as lights, and then we can be effective evangelists.

You cannot shine as a light in the world if you did not hold firm the word of life. This is one of the major wrongs of liberal Christianity. That belief system does not hold firm to the Scriptures, so there is no real hope, no true gospel there to “hold forth.” It is empty morality.

- E. The complaining and arguing from verse 14 still are in the mind of the author as he writes these words—we shine when we act differently than the world in how we handle difficulties and conflicts. More arguing and complaining makes our light fade and look more like the dark background against which we are placed.

#### **IV. And Persevering to Show Ministry Labor was Fruitful, v.**

##### **16b-18**

- A. If the Philippian Christians keep holding on, keep believing, keep obeying, that is, persevering, this will give Paul a reason for rejoicing at the judgment of Christ because it will mean that his teaching and preaching work “remained” and did not disappear

into thin air. John 15:16 says, “I chose you...that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.” That is what the servant of God wants. It takes energy and toil to do the work, but it is easily worth it when the result is strong fruit. Fruit is energizing!

The salvation of souls is not the only fruit. Paul wants to present every man perfect in Christ (Col. 1:28)<sup>2</sup> and a big part of *that* is for disciples to bear more fruit themselves. The end-goal is not Christians; the end-goal is *fruit-bearing, serving* Christians.

- B. As a pastor myself, I can understand Paul’s concern. There are people that pastors pour a lot of time and effort into (“running and laboring”) who show initial signs of progress, but then they fall away entirely, or they just stagnate and show no ultimate progress in belief or practice of the gospel, or worse, turn on the faith, or the minister or church, like Judas. It feels like the pastor’s labor was useless. The failure was due to some deficiency in the running and laboring of the minister, or in a lack of true receptivity in the disciple. Either way, Paul wants to rejoice, not be sad.
- C. When there are problems in marriages and church relations and laziness and lack of discipline and diligence in the things of God and so on, these weigh against the shepherd’s “boast.” Such problems wear him out, and they are also unprofitable for the sheep (Hebrews 13:17).
- D. This thought causes us to turn our minds toward the end of our lives and think about what we have accomplished. The same for Paul: he began to write about being poured out as a drink offering. He was reflecting the possibility that soon his life may end, and he pictured his life of service as a “topper” to the lives of the Philippians, where they too were like a sacrifice in service to the Lord (Romans 12:1-2). Whatever they did for the Lord was like a sacrifice to the Lord in the Old Testament. See 1 Peter 2:5.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to MacDonald, p. 1968 for that reminder. Temporary reception of the Word of God is not the object. True, long-lasting discipleship is the goal. We not only want to see people delivered from sin, we want to see them develop in sanctification and be deployed into service (Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor*, 2007, p. 13). Or: saved, sanctified, serve. Or: join, grow, get involved, go out.

- E. I do not know if you grasp this notion of life-as-service-as-worship, but when you do is when you will be really living for God. That is, when you see your life as something that can be used to sacrifice for God, to serve God, to live for Him, something being poured out to the last drop...*then* you are really living with eternal profit.
- F. A drink offering (libation) was a ceremonial pouring out of a liquid, usually of wine, as an offering to God. See Gen. 35:14, 2 Samuel 3:16-17. It was poured on top of another offering on an altar. It was given fully to God. It was common in pagan practice, offering to the “god” who was receiving the sacrifice (2 Kings 16:13).
- G. Paul saw his own service to God the same way, where *he* was a sacrifice (2 Tim. 4:6). Both Paul and the Philippian believers, and you and I who are Christians, are priests together before God, offering sacrifices please to Him. In so doing, Paul helped others to grow in their faith. His sacrifice enabled their sacrifices, thus having a multiplicative effect. We too in our sacrifices can cause more praise to accrue to God, more worship and honor, more obedience, more service.
- H. Paul was joyful about what he was suffering as a prisoner for Christ in Rome because it was for the advance of the gospel. So too the Philippians should be glad, both about the suffering of Paul, and about their own. The natural reaction in the face of persecution is fear, and complaining and disputing. But Paul is not thinking that way. He is thinking about the fruit that is produced by preaching more of Christ.
- I. At some point, Paul would be with Christ. That was good. But what was also good was having good results in ministering to others for Christ. This means that you have not wasted your life. That is a truly good and satisfying way to live. If we could boast in *that* kind of stuff, if we could be glad and rejoice with fellow believers when they succeed, then we would be truly happy in Jesus.

## Conclusion

God is working in you...to hold steadfastly to His sound teaching...so you shine as lights in the world...so you will not complain and argue, and so you will bear lasting fruit.

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