

## **GRUMBLING, COMPLAINING AND DISPUTING**

### **The Book of Philippians #15**

When you have a two year old girl living in your home, as we do, you are constantly dealing with grumbling and complaining and the disputes that arise when a toddler's will runs up against a parent's or grandparent's will. Words like, "I want", "I don't want", "but I want to do this or that", "I don't want to go to bed", "but I want to wear that dress", and similar phrases become the standard response when she wants something which she cannot have or want to do something which she is told she cannot do. This, of course, is also accompanied by the theatrics of whining and crying in order to convey her complete displeasure in being told "no".

As we grow into adults we learn to express ourselves in a more polite and socially acceptable manner while still letting our desires known. We exchange whining and temper tantrums for something more in line with middle-school behavior - like withholding attention or affection until we get what we want. As we mature farther we also get better at keeping our frustrations in check finding more adult ways to get what we want without appearing childish in the process. We resort to subtle manipulation and passive aggression.

So we never outgrow our sinful desire to want what we want when we want it or to protest what appears to us as an injustice or personal slight. Unlike a two-year old we no longer break down in front of an audience. Instead we seek out like minded-individuals who feel as we do and talk amongst ourselves about the injustices of the workplace or the salary package or the working conditions or the political climate or the justice system. We seek out a group of people who agree with us who make us feel protected and justified in our response to the issues of the day. When we talk amongst ourselves like this it is called grumbling and complaining and it can lead to disputes that cause division in the home, the church, the workplace, even spreading to the city and throughout the country.

There are many things to grumble and complain about in this world, many things about which we disagree, many areas in which injustice seems to have a stronghold despite our best efforts to make amends. Some occur within families, some within churches, some within the political realm, and some within society itself. When left unresolved and unaddressed these injustices (either real or perceived) lead to disputes and dissensions.

For the most part we have parental authority to help resolve family issues. We have denominational structures that can help to resolve church issues, we have the political process to resolve political issues, and we have the justice system to aid in resolving societal issues. Not all of these structures are as effective in resolving issues as they could be but there is a process in place. When that process fails to do its duty, or if the process provides an inadequate solution then we have the right to address our grievances through peaceful demonstrations. This is the right of every American granted to them by the Constitution.

Recently the people of Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland have taken to the streets to protest the injustices which they believe have occurred within their cities and their systems of justice. And they have every right to do so. If the grumbings and disputes arising out of these communities have a legitimate foundation they need to be heard and their issues need to be addressed

But they have not always had peaceful protests. Riots, looting, vandalism and arson have occurred. Damage to personal property has occurred, destroying the livelihood of innocent business owners, and physical harm has been perpetrated on some individuals, even those in authority.

As is so often the case today, those who are fighting for a cause use these events as springboards for their own agenda, intentionally inserting violence as a means of escalating the situation in order to bring about their own desired result. And often this result has nothing to do with the original injustice.

Now let me make one thing clear before I move on. I am not taking sides here, nor am I passing judgment. I am merely making an observation for the purpose of leading us to God's word in order to bring a practical application to a current crisis.

Christians are not immune or unaware of these injustices. And they can often be drawn into endless debates and discussions about them and even incited into some type of physical response as well. Last week on Facebook someone posted that the Bible had nothing to say on the issue of the injustice and pent up anger in Baltimore. It was a sad comment especially because it was written by someone claiming to be a believer in Christ.

But is this person right? Does the Bible have nothing to say on the issue of injustice? Hardly. The Bible may not tell you what color of house to buy or rent but it certainly has much to say about injustice and those in authority. It also speaks to those who grumble and cause disputes, stirring up division and dissension. We'll address grumbling and disputing in a moment but let's look first at some overarching principles in Scripture regarding authority and our response to it as well as the root of these outbursts of anger. They are found in Colossians 5 and Romans chapters 12 and 13.

#### COLOSSIANS 5:19-23

*"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

#### ROMANS 12:16-19, 21

*"Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

#### ROMANS 13:1-7

*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good.*

*But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor."*

But what are Christians instructed to do when we have things to grumble and complain about? For certainly not everything our governments do is right or just. What is to be our response when we see an injustice, whether big or small? How can we manifest externally the power of God that resides internally within us?

Though we are generally told to avoid disputes and divisions, Scripture says they do have their purpose. Though this example is on a much smaller scale than that of Ferguson and Baltimore, it nonetheless has its application.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-19 we read about a church who came together to eat the Lord's Supper. The problem was that some were so hungry they ate too much and some were so thirsty they became drunk. This was not what the Lord's Supper was about and it was dishonoring to the memory of the Lord. Here is what Paul had to say about this issue.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-19

*“...I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.”*

Paul is saying that dividing lines are inevitable. There will be those who think and act one way and those who think and act another way. And those that act according to the will of God will soon become evident to all by their godly behavior and response to the issue that is causing this division. Paul does not shy away from stating the truth and siding with those who walk this truth out. But neither does he condemn. He merely acknowledges the issue, brings God's light to bear upon it and counsels those in error to redirect their efforts to bring harmony to the church rather than division. Yet he holds all accountable for their actions.

Paul has been addressing this same issue of division in the church and the injustice of the world coming through the Jews and the Romans of his era in the first chapter of Philippians. In the midst of this injustice he tells us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, instructing us to have the same attitude in ourselves which was also in Christ Jesus – an attitude of humility, freely emptying ourselves of self in order to be devoted entirely to the will and plan of God. As I said a few weeks ago, **attitude is the foundation upon which all action is based**. Without this attitude of humility any attempt to manifest the character of God will be futile. So starting with this basic attitude Paul goes on to tell us:

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

When Paul says to “work out” our salvation he is simply saying to use what we already possess internally and make it visible through our thoughts, intents, speech, deeds, attitudes and actions.

An attitude of humility plays a key role in the working out of our salvation. It allows us to work in cooperation with the Spirit of God to bring forth the salvation implanted within us through faith in Christ. Why? Because humility is recognizing that God is greater than we are, that His ways are better than our ways, and that He will always know more than we know at any given moment in time. It is recognizing who is the servant and who is the Master.

It is important to understand this concept. We are the vehicle but He is the driver. It is impossible to work out our salvation without God's help. We cannot manifest God's attributes without God's Spirit. We can possess the desire to do good but the actual doing of it is not possible without the power of God working within us (Romans 7:18). That's why Paul tells us that God is at work in us helping us to will and to work for His good pleasure.

For this to happen as God intended, it takes our cooperation. Our will needs to be in agreement with God's will in order for the perfection of God to be manifested in us. And that is why Paul is telling us to "work out" our salvation. We have a part to play in this process. So let's now look at how we are to do this. Let's go back to the instruction manual to see what the next step is in the working out of our salvation.

#### PHILIPPIANS 4:14-16

*"Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain."*

In these three verses Paul gives only one instruction on how to work out our salvation. He will reveal more in his closing chapter and certainly there are other places we can look, but it's interesting that Paul chose to give this particular instruction as an example of how to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Surely you and I would have provided a longer list for bringing to life the righteousness that resides within us. But Paul chose this command, "*Do all things without grumbling or disputing.*" Seemingly a strange choice but perhaps if we look closely it will not seem so strange after all.

Why do you think Paul chose to focus on grumbling and disputing as manifestations of righteousness as opposed to some other attributes? The key lies in understanding Paul's purpose in giving this command. He says to:

#### PHILIPPIANS 2:14-15

*"Do all things without grumbling or disputing so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world..."*

If the purpose of God's Spirit in our life is so that the life of God can be manifested in us, then by doing everything without grumbling or disputing we are providing the proof that we are children of God, blameless and innocent in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. How do we prove our salvation is genuine? We prove it by doing all things without grumbling or disputing.

By the way, the word translated as "grumbling" is also translated as "complaining" or "murmuring". And the word translated as "disputing" is also translated as "arguing". So Paul is addressing the whole gamut: complaining, murmuring, and arguing as well as grumbling and disputing.

But if the absence of grumbling and disputing is proof that we are blameless before God then what does the presence of grumbling and disputing prove? We need look no further than the example of the Israelites in the wilderness who constantly complained, grumbled, argued and disputed with Moses and Aaron. If not grumbling proves we are blameless, what were they proving when they did grumble and complain?

In Numbers 14:26-28 God's response to their murmuring is revealed. We are told that their grumbling, complaining and arguing caused plagues to come upon them and led to an entire generation dying in the wilderness, resulting in a forty year delay in entering the Promised Land by their descendants. The consequences experienced by these people are reiterated in Hebrews when Paul echoes God's warning that not everyone whom God called out of Egypt entered His Promised Land rest. They did not enter because of their grumbling and complaining against the Lord Himself and against His servants (Moses, etc.). God equates complaining and arguing with judgment. And judgment belongs only to God. That's why James also echoes the words of Paul.

JAMES 5:9

*“Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.”*

But their grumbling and complaining was only the outward symptom of an inward problem. And what was the driving force behind their complaint? What caused their internal murmuring to boil to the surface and manifest itself in complaining? In Numbers 14:11 we find the answer. It was their lack of faith.

NUMBERS 14:11

*“The Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?’”*

It appears the source of their complaints was lack of faith and trust in God's provision and protection. Think about it. If God can be trusted to protect and defend us, if God is our advocate, if God is able to provide our daily needs and provide strength for tomorrow's uncertainties, then what is there to complain about? Yes, we will encounter injustices in this world and they need to be made right by those who have the wisdom and courage to do so. But if grumbling and complaining stem from a lack of trust in God's ability to provide a solution to the injustice, then the solution is not to take matters into our own hands or to “open mouth and insert foot” as they say, but rather to present our case to God and seek His help, willing to be used in whatever capacity to see an end to the injustice.

Some of these efforts may take years, even decades to resolve. Such was the case with William Wilberforce in England as he fought a twenty-six year battle to abolish slavery in England from 1807 to 1833. Some we may not see corrected in our lifetime but the work we began will hopefully see fruition for our children and grandchildren. Like Martin Luther King we have a dream that someday things will be better for those who are currently oppressed. And we fight for that dream now and pass it on to the next generation. But we must also be realistic. Some injustices may never see a resolution in this life. They may have to wait for the Judgment seat of God before they are completely eradicated.

To be clear Christians do not hold the position that there will never be anything to complain about or to dispute over, but rather that as believers we should use our energies to believe God for resolutions and to trust God for ultimate justice rather than expend our energies grumbling, disputing, and complaining. Because complaining stems for a lack of faith in God's ability to provide and protect and we believe and rely on God to bring an end to all injustice, both here and in the world to come.

Perhaps David said it best in Psalm 73 as he reflected on the evil in the world, his concern about the lack of restraint against it, and the frustration of trying to remain pure in an impure world.

PSALM 73:11-20

*“The (wicked) say, ‘How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?’ Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning. If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.*

*When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.”*

David understood that this life was not all there was, that there was coming a day of reckoning for all. Justice may not always be seen in this life but there will come a time when the Judge of the universe will bring justice to bear on all those who practiced lawlessness. And there will be a reward for those who did not succumb to evil but instead trusted their souls to a faithful Creator to do what was right (1 Peter 4:19).

David trusted God for these things and placed His faith in the One who would one day make all things right. He did not shy away from addressing the injustices of his time, however. After all, he was a man of supreme authority in the land and he used this authority to right many wrongs. But he was also a man after God’s own heart. He sought out God’s will and did his best to bring his own will into compliance with the will of God whenever he addressed injustice both in himself or in others.

So, according to Paul, it would seem that one of the best tests of the validity of a person’s testimony of faith is their ability to not grumble or complain. Does this mean that we have to agree with everyone or that we will never have a dispute over something? Of course not. The issue is not if they occur because they will, but rather when they occur how are we to respond if we are not to resort to grumbling about or disputing over them?

To help us out let’s look a little closer at the meaning of the words “grumbling” and “disputing”. The meaning of the word translated as “grumbling” is “complaint” or “murmur” and it is reflective of a secret debate, a secret displeasure not openly avowed. A good example of this can be found in John 7:12-13.

JOHN 7:12-13

*There was much grumbling among the crowds concerning (Jesus); some were saying, ‘He is a good man’; others were saying, ‘No, on the contrary, He leads the people astray.’ Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews.”*

So we see that murmuring or grumbling is something that occurs secretly amongst a few. It is not an open debate where the person or thing about which there is a complaint is part of the discussion. It can spill over to an open debate but it starts without an honest confrontation with the person upon which the complaint is based.

I’m sure we have all walked into a room and had the conversation suddenly stop. There are some things people talk about that they do not want to hear. And usually those things are about us. So the room grows silent. They wish to talk about us in a negative manner to others but they do not wish to confront us directly with the problem.

This was what was happening with people’s opinion of Jesus. Because of their fear of the Jews they did

not wish to speak openly about their concerns or opinions concerning Jesus. If Jewish leaders had walked into the room where normal citizens were discussing their opinion of who Jesus was, then their discussions would have abruptly ended.

But what about “disputes”? The meaning of the word translated as “disputing” is also an internal thing. It is the thinking of a man who is deliberating within himself. It is a thought or inward reasoning; an internal deliberation or questioning about what is true; a hesitation; it is the work of doubt within a man that causes him to be reluctant to exercise his faith. This is made clearer in Luke chapter 9.

LUKE 9:46-47

*“An argument started among (the disciples) as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side...”*

Instead of addressing the argument which had started among the disciples, Jesus addressed the thinking of their heart where the internal debate was occurring. They had already started the debate within themselves and it had now spilled out into the open. Yet they were not talking to Jesus about it. The discussion or dispute was only happening amongst themselves.

It is interesting that the solution Jesus provided to His disciples was humility. The same attitude which Paul says we should have when he tells us to do all things without grumbling or disputing. But knowing that our internal struggles are the cause of our grumbings and disputes, what are we to do with them? What is the alternative? What does Scripture say we are to do with these internal struggles?

According to Scripture the first thing we must do is to bring our grumbings to God. Only God can calm the internal strife within us that is causing our complaint and dispute. I am not talking about complaining about God to God, though I think there is a place for that as long as it is done honestly and in reverence for His power and authority. I am talking about bringing to God our complaints about others and the complaints of others about us.

PSALM 55:1-3, 16-18

*Give ear to my prayer, O God; and do not hide Yourself from my supplication. Give heed to me and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and am surely distracted, because of the voice of the enemy, because of the pressure of the wicked; for they bring down trouble upon me and in anger they bear a grudge against me....*

*“As for me, I shall call upon God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur and He will hear my voice. He will redeem my soul in peace from the battle which is against me.”*

God can bring peace out of turmoil. Just think of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. After sweating drops of blood and pleading for His cup of suffering to pass Jesus gave in to God’s will and plan and allowed others to lead Him away to His trials, His beating, and to His death. God brought calmness and peace to the battle that was waging war against him in His soul. And God will do the same for us if we will go to Him and ask for His help in resolving the turmoil within us. Like Jesus, we may have to surrender our will to His but if we are willing to pay that price God will bring peace out of our complaining and murmuring.

The second thing we must do is to bring our complaints out into the open, not hiding behind them or

secretly plotting revenge because of them. These complaints should not remain as internal struggles or debates but rather should be processed openly in order to seek out a resolution of the issues. And leadership plays a key role in this resolution. Here is what the early church did when it encountered its first recorded internal complaint.

#### ACTS 6:1-6

*Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' The statement found approval with the whole congregation..."*

The issue that was dividing the church and causing much complaining was the perceived unfair treatment of the widows. There was a daily provision of food for them but somehow some of the widows were being overlooked. This was probably unintentional but certainly problematic because a division had already been formed - Hellenistic Jews against native Jews – due to the complaints of unfair treatment. So leadership decided something needed to be done before this was allowed to go any further. The twelve disciples summoned the congregation together and gave them direction on how to solve the problem.

Notice that the disciples did not offer themselves as a solution to the problem. They weighed the issue at hand but remained committed to what God had called them to do. In other words they did not insert themselves into the middle of the problem as part of the solution. Notice also that the disciples were united in presenting their solution to the congregation but gave the congregation the authority to implement the change in a manner that involved them in the solution. The disciples would be over the men whom they chose, but the congregation would do the choosing. Coming up with a solution and involving the disputed parties in the resolution goes a long way to resolving complaints. And keeping the authority for oversight in the hands of trusted leadership can help keep the issue from reoccurring.

Avoiding conflict does not make it go away. It only allows it to grow. But confronting it from a position of authority and humility along with a desire to get buy-in on the solution from the offended parties can have a calming effect on the issue and bring resolution to something which seemed insurmountable in the heat of the moment.

One more thing we should notice. There is no blame mentioned here, only a solution. If left unchecked this could have caused much dissention and division in the church. But leadership was wise enough to do something about this as soon as they got wind of the problem. Complaints can divide us if left unaddressed but they do not have to if leadership will take control of the situation and provide a mutually agreeable solution to resolve the conflict.

Though leadership can assist us in resolving our issues, we are all held personally accountable and responsible for how we as individuals handle complaints. There is one final instruction from Scripture that addresses the issue of personal accountability. It comes from Colossians 3:12-13.

#### COLOSSIANS 3:12-13

*"So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."*

None of us are perfect. We can always find fault with ourselves and with others. There will always be something to complain and grumble about if we look hard enough or become sensitive enough to the real or perceived wrongs done to us or to others. Sometimes there is no resolution that will satisfy our idea of justice; none that will bring the balance of fairness to the issue. What do we do in those times? According to Scripture we forgive, just as the Lord forgave us.

God's complaint against us is that we are consistently disobedient. Our every deed is covered with sin. There is no good to be found in us (Psalm 14:2-4). We could never provide a just or fair solution to God's complaint against us. The issue goes too deep and is so insurmountable the flesh and mind of man could never bring a just resolution to the issue. Sin infiltrates our very being so that even if we did come up with a solution it would be filled with the sinful and unacceptable deeds and thoughts of man. God's forgiveness was the only just and fair resolution to God's complaint against man. And God provides that solution to all who receive Him as Lord and Savior.

So the final way for us to handle complaints is to forgive – to cover them with the blood of Christ just as we were covered and cast them away from us as far as the east is from the west, the same place God has cast His complaints against us.

How is this done? According to Colossians it starts with putting on a heart of compassion followed by kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. A heart full of complaints can rob a heart of compassion, filling it instead with thoughts of injustice and separation, leaving no room for kindness, humility, gentleness or patience to permeate our attitudes. But a heart full of compassion does not allow the negative to find a resting place. It builds a home in which kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience can dwell. This in turn provides the impetus and the will for the heart to forgive.

Grumbling and complaining will be a part of our lives until the final complaint is resolved in eternity. Disputes will continue until the final dispute is settled by the Judge of all. Until then we can bring our complaints and disputes to God so that He can resolve the conflict that is battling for control within us before it bubbles over and bursts out onto the surface. We can also allow church leadership to resolve church complaints so that together we can agree on a solution to the issue about which the complaint was lodged. And finally we can bear with one another putting on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; using forgiveness as the tool for resolving any unresolvable complaint we may have with anyone; just as the Lord has used forgiveness as His tool for resolving His unresolvable conflict with us.

By doing these things, by resolving complaints and disputes in this manner we will “*prove ourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom (we) appear as lights in the world...*” The world does not resolve its disputes in this manner so it is up to us to show the way. We must be the light that shines in the darkness of this world to show how complaints and disputes should be properly handled.

Our attitude will drive our actions because **our attitude is the foundation upon which all our actions are based**. We must have an attitude of humility. It must be pervasive in all we do. Taking on the attitude of humility is the beginning of the process. Working out our salvation with fear and trembling is the necessary tool to ensure we respond appropriately in our thoughts and deeds. Doing all things without grumbling or disputing will be the worked out proof that we are children of God, blameless and innocent in His sight.

Let me leave you with this final Scripture which I believe sums up all that I have attempted to say.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8

*“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgresses and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger on all these things, just as we told you before and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity but in sanctification. So he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.”*