

**“WHINE OR SHINE”**  
*(Studies in Philippians - 7)*

Philippians 2:14-18 (p. 1139)

Have you heard the one about the fellow who entered a Cistercian monastery? Bound to a vow of silence, he was permitted to speak only once each year, and he was limited to two words. After the first year he reported to the Abbot and said, “*Bed hard.*” After his second year he said, “*Food bad.*” On the third anniversary he came to the Abbot and said, “*I quit!*” To which the Abbot replied, “*I’m not surprised. You’ve done nothing but complain ever since you got here.*”

It’s a caricature, of course – and really quite unfair. But the story does make a valid point. People tend to label you by what they hear you saying routinely. Here’s a question to ponder. If someone were to draw a caricature of you – a cartoon to depict how others commonly perceive you, complete with one of those dialogue balloons coming out of your mouth – what words do you think would be printed there? Would they be complaints? Would they be argumentative?

Now, before you start beating yourself up or even becoming overly analytical, let’s acknowledge the fact that complaining is commonplace. There are those who will gripe about almost anything. Some people seem to be naturally negative. Others have made looking for bad things in life their full-time occupation. It’s a sad truism that the most indulged society is generally the most discontent. The more we have the more we seem to be dissatisfied with whatever we’ve got – and so we grouse and gripe. One wag put it this way, “*Don’t complain about your problems; 80% of people really don’t care – and the other 20% think you deserve them.*” All that notwithstanding, there is no shortage of things for us to complain about. And I suspect we could lump most complainers into four basic categories: whiners, martyrs, cynics and perfectionists.

The whiners are people who seem to wake up feeling negative. They are notable for using phrases such as: “*It’s not fair. Everyone else gets all the breaks.*” Those who hear such phrases from their school age children will open their Parenting Manual under “Complaints” and there find the proper parental response: “*Who said life is fair!*” God never said it would be fair. People don’t get to fly over pigeons.

Then there are the martyrs. One of their favorite phrases is: “*No one appreciates me.*” Moses complaining to God in Numbers 11:11 is a classic example. Martyrs tend to be rather adept at passive-aggressive behavior. Rather than just letting you know they are annoyed, they’ll couch their complaints in

pious tones of self-sacrifice. They give and give and give, but nobody appreciates them.

Next come the cynics whose mantra is, “*Nothing ever changes*” or “*Life is short – then you die.*” In Ecclesiastes 1:2 Solomon the wise pronounces his summary judgment on life: “*Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*” I wonder if he was referring to picking up after his kids. What’s the point! The cynic tends to exude an odor of superiority; and having that intellectual edge to his complaining makes it hard to refute – even if he’s patently wrong.

Lastly, we have the perfectionists whose favorite phrase is: “*Is that the best you can do?*” Nothing is ever right for this person. It is never good enough, because they have a standard you can never attain to. So their complaints will wear you down. In *The Message* Eugene Peterson renders Proverbs 27:15 this way: “*A nagging spouse is like the drip, drip, drip of a leaky faucet; you can’t turn it off, and you can’t get away from it.*” If you are married to a perfectionist, or were raised by one, or work for one, you know you will never satisfy their constant demands.

Before I go any further, resist the temptation to apply this message to somebody else. This lesson is for you and me, not others. You may think you have justifiable gripes, but you’re not a complainer; that you have the gift of discernment, but not a critical spirit. Don’t go thinking about who this sermon would be good for, and then mail it to select friends and co-workers – anonymously. Now let’s get into our text.

At verse 14 Paul wrote, “*Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...*” Let me make three observations about our text today.

First, complaining and obedience just don’t mix. Remember the context of our lesson. Last week we were reminded in verses 12-13 that we are supposed to work out what God is working in us. In fact, God expects us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because he is at work in us both to will and to act according to his good purpose. In other words, there is a connection between God’s resources and our choices. God has given us his Word; we are supposed to study it. God has given us his Spirit; we have to learn to depend on him. And God allows us to face circumstances; we have to decide how we’re going to respond to them.

In light of that mandate, Paul then goes on to say, “*Do everything without complaining or arguing...*” Granted, you and I already do a great many things without complaining. But the clear command here is for 100% obedience. “*Do*

*everything without complaining or arguing,*” it says. The word translated “complaining” implies impatient criticism or open, audible grumbling. And the word translated “arguing” is *dialogismon* from which we get “dialogue.” To us a “dialogue” may sound like a neutral discussion; but the Greek word refers to arguing and haggling. The focus here is on the attitude of the heart.

But the obedience that Paul calls for in verse 14 is an obedience that plays out both in action and in attitude. Right behavior but with a wrong attitude just isn’t right. It is like the strong-willed child who was told to sit down. He refused to comply. Again he was told, this time with the promise of some physical persuasion. So the boy promptly sat down. But as he sat, he muttered under his breath, *“I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside.”*

Did he obey? Physically he conformed, but his obedience was all but negated by the complaining. Now, it may be easy for parents with a healthy self-esteem to laugh off that kind of behavior in a three-year-old. But how about when your son or daughter is thirteen, or eighteen, or twenty-seven? Outwardly they may do as you request. But their eyes tell you that in their hearts they have already squared off and they defy you to touch what is going on in the inside. That’s one of those times when being a parent can really hurt. Imagine how God feels when his children behave that way? And we do it far more than we want to admit. Complaining and obedience just don’t mix.

Second, complaining compromises our calling. As the Christian is expected to stop criticizing others, so our lives mustn’t give anybody else an excuse to criticize us. In verse 15 Paul describes a life free of complaining. He writes, *“that they may become blameless and pure.”* That is, no accusation can be leveled against them because they act graciously, without complaining or arguing. And they behave that way because they know they are “children of God.” Paul reminds us that, since we’ve been adopted by God’s grace, there is an expected standard of behavior, and that includes no complaining or arguing.

The problem, however, is that the culture in which we live is, to use Paul’s terms, “crooked and depraved.” Actually, Paul lifted that line from Moses’ farewell address in Deuteronomy 32. Moses said: *“They have acted corruptly toward him; to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation.”* Moses was reminding the Israelites there about the people who would soon be their neighbors once they entered the Promised Land.

Now, there are all sorts of ways in which the world has become “crooked and perverse.” But remember the context of our lesson today. Paul wasn’t referring to just any old sin. Our perversion is perhaps most painfully evident in our complaining. In the same way, I suspect Moses was reminding the children of Israel, in a not-so-gentle way, that they weren’t so different from their perverse neighbors.

“*How so?*” you may ask. Think about all the things the Israelites did that upset God during the Exodus. It wasn’t so much their immoral behavior or their blatant disregard for the Law that gave God grief and Moses indigestion. No, the one sin that was repeated again and again by Israel, which in turn angered God again and again, was their grumbling, their grouching. By quoting Moses there, and thus taking his readers back to Israel in the Wilderness, Paul was reminding us of the seriousness of our sinful griping. So what is the problem with complaining?

Well for one thing, when you complain you’re complaining against God. God is sovereign. So when people complained against Moses and Aaron, Moses replied, “*God has heard your complaining against Him.*” Moses understood that, since God is the One who foreordains whatever is going to come to pass – when you complain, your gripe is with God. And keep in mind that complaining is not just a bad habit; it’s a sin. So the Bible doesn’t suggest we stop complaining; it commands it.

Here’s another practical problem presented by our prattling protest. When you complain you’re not going to enter the Promised Land. From the Red Sea to Canaan, Israel had a two-week journey, and yet they wandered for forty years. Why? It’s because they complained. So God told them to take another lap around the desert. My eighth grade gym teacher understood this principle. If you complained about climbing the ropes – “*Take a lap.*” If you grouched about dodge ball – “*Take a lap.*” If you whined about taking a lap – “*Take two laps.*” The Israelites grumbled and grouched, and God said, “*Take another lap – see if you can get it right this time.*” Again and again they complained until finally God said: “*Just die in the wilderness.*” And a whole generation did just that. That is how seriously God takes complaining.

So, since complaining is clearly not a spiritual gift what, then, is our calling? We are to “shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life.” We live in a time of unbelief; among people who are in open rebellion against God. Darkness has gripped our world because people do not know the wonderful news that there is a Father who cares, who directs and controls all things for our good and his glory. To this dark world you and I have been called, not to join in the harangue about failed government leaders, nor to bemoan the status of public education, nor to wag our finger at Hollywood’s latest attack on the family, but to shine out – to point the way.

If you wander at night in need of direction, the north star does not mock your wandering nor complain about the darkness. It just quietly points the way to go and gets you properly oriented. That’s how God wants you and me to be. But I can’t hold out the word of life, telling people that God is in loving control, and then complain about my circumstances. Blamelessness and grumbling are antithetical. In brief, complaining compromises our calling.

And here's one last note: complaining undermines our worship. Now, the way Paul illustrated this may be hard to grasp since he used a picture foreign to us. Paul saw their service to God as a sacrifice. And to that sacrifice, Paul pictured his own life as a drink offering. In the Old Testament the drink offering was like a finishing touch, a special addition to an offering that was given in response to God's grace. Just as the Philippians' obedience was a sacrifice to God, Paul saw his life as an additional "thank you."

What does this have to do with complaining? The drink offering was given in response to all the wonderful things God has done. It was the antithesis of complaining. But remember, Paul said that his life was a joyous addition to their obedience. But what kind of life did he have to be so thankful for?

In his early days, Paul was on the fast track in Judaism, voted rabbi most likely to succeed. Then he met Jesus, and from that day on his life was a mess. It was one hardship, one difficulty, one problem after another. By the time he wrote this letter he was incarcerated in Rome, chained 24-7 to a guard. He was betrayed by his own countrymen. Less scrupulous preachers were taking advantage of his absence to promote themselves. The church he started in Philippi was experiencing division. If anyone had a legitimate right to complain, it was Paul.

Yet he was able to say that he could rejoice. Why? It's because Paul saw God's hand in the midst of suffering; he understood that even the mundane and the maddening are all part of God's providential care. So Paul used this imagery of sacrifice to put all our complaining in perspective. In the Old Testament the drink offering was but a response to another sacrifice that had already been made – the sin offering, in which our sin was transferred to an innocent lamb who took the blame so that we could be free of our sin.

Paul understood that our lives of sacrifice are only a faint "thank you" added to Jesus' sacrifice of himself for us. The cross shuts down all of our complaining. You and I might be tempted to say, "*It's not fair. I should be more appreciated. I deserve a better deal.*" But the Cross says, "*No, you deserve to hang here.*" In fact, you and I deserve far, far worse than we could ever imagine. But the cross also says that you and I have received far, far better than we could ever dream: our sin forgiven, adoption as God's forever beloved children. Paul understood that when we're dealt a bad hand and we think life stinks, the cross makes us think again.

What do you have to complain about? Serious financial problems, a marriage that is unfulfilling, health failing, children rebelling, parents demanding, work frustrating? Whatever it is, God has given you an opportunity to thank Jesus for all he has done for you. It is easy to obey when God tells you to do what you want to do. When all is going well, complaining is the farthest thing from your mind. But when life is tough, when God commands what is hard, when you want

to throw in the towel – that’s when you have an opportunity like none other to worship God.

What type of complainer are you: martyr, whiner, perfectionist, cynic? Or are you by some amazing ability, like me, able to be all four at the same time? What would happen in your life if all the complaining stopped – starting right now with you? What difference would it make if it was gone from your home, your job? You can do it because there is a cross on which Jesus died to put enmity to death. And through his death and resurrection he gives you the Spirit to conquer complaining. So if you are in Christ, it is your choice: whine or shine.

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