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GRUMBLE, GRUMBLE--NOT!

Philippians 2:14-18

By

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Philippians Lesson 14

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Complaining is probably one of the sins most tolerated by Christians. We tolerate it and perhaps don't even think of it as sin because we're all so prone to do it. I remember when God began convicting me of my grumbling spirit. I was in seminary in Dallas, where it is hot and humid. My apartment did not have air conditioning and there was no shower, only a bathtub. We had a rubber showerhead hooked to the tub faucet, so you could take a sit-down shower. On a hot and humid day I was taking my sit-down shower and I was grumbling to myself about the inconvenience of it and about how hot this crummy apartment was. This was during the Vietnam war, and it suddenly hit me: I could be over there in that sweltering jungle, getting shot at, in conditions a lot worse than my Dallas apartment! I had to confess my grumbling spirit to the Lord and give thanks to Him for the blessings of a sit-down shower.

After telling the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, because it was none other than God who was at work in their midst, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (2:12-13), Paul goes from preaching to meddling: He applies it specifically by telling them (and us) to do *all* things without grumbling and disputing. In the context, he is especially exhorting us against grumbling and disputing against one another in the church, because he has been urging us to adopt the humble, self-sacrificing, servant ways of the Lord Jesus. But to grumble against any person or any circumstance is really to grumble against the sovereign God who wills and works all things in our lives (2:13). So Paul's exhortation means that we have to confront our grumbling and griping as sin. I still struggle with the problem, as most of us do!

I wish Paul had been a bit more realistic and down-to-earth. He could have said, "Try to do *most* things without grumbling or disputing." That's realistic, isn't it? I can give it a try. But *all things*? In fact, the word translated "all things" is emphatic in the Greek text. Paul isn't going to let us off the hook! And, his reason for this commandment concerns our individual and corporate testimony

before the world (2:15, 16). Paul's own example (2:17) shows that not only are we not to grumble and dispute, but positively, we are to be marked by joy, even in the midst of difficult trials. So he is saying,

Our testimony as children of God requires that we be marked, not by grumbling and disputing, but by joy, even in trials.

To explain and apply Paul's words, I want to consider 4 things:

1. Our testimony of Christ should be uppermost in our thinking so as to affect all our attitudes and behavior.

What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. What does it mean to glorify God? To make Him look good, as He truly is. To glorify God means that when people look at our lives as Christians, they should extol and exalt our God whom they see shining through us. So as children of God our testimony--what our lives communicate about our Savior--should be uppermost in our thinking so that our attitudes, our behavior, and our words bring glory to God.

Paul here refers to Christians as "children of God." A specific Old Testament passage is behind Paul's words. In Deuteronomy 32:5, in the song of Moses, in referring to the grumbling and unbelief of the children of Israel in the wilderness, Moses says, "They have acted corruptly toward Him, they are not His children, because of their defect; but are a perverse and crooked generation." Paul turns that around and says that we are God's children, living in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, and thus we must be careful not to grumble and dispute, as Israel did in the wilderness, because as God's people we are supposed to shine forth in this dark world as lights, holding forth to people the word of life, the gospel of Christ.

Children reflect on their parents, don't they? Of course all children are selfish, rebellious sinners by nature. They all are immature and express themselves in inappropriate ways. They all grumble at times. No child is sinless. But, even so, children will take on the behaviors, attitudes, and words of their parents. I worked with the Boys Brigade program when Daniel was younger.

A boy came to that program whose parents went to a liberal church where the gospel was not preached. This boy had the habit of taking the Lord's name in vain as a word of exclamation. I took him aside once and explained to him that God's name is holy and that we shouldn't use it carelessly, as he was. Then the dad came one evening, and I immediately saw where the boy learned to take the Lord's name in vain!

Children's attitudes reflect on the parents. If a child is sullen, unhappy, and always complaining about life, it doesn't speak well of the parents. It may be that the parents are truly loving, caring, people who provide well for their kids. But the child's bad attitude makes people think poorly of the parents, no matter how good of parents they really are.

That's the point we have to keep in mind as children of the Heavenly Father. He is perfect in all His ways. But, let's face it: Sometimes His ways lead us into the wilderness, where there are hardships. When you read Exodus, you see how God delivered Israel from Egypt in a powerful way. He sent the plagues, then He led Israel to the edge of the Red Sea and brought Pharaoh's army on their heels. He miraculously parted the sea so that Israel could march through on dry ground, and then brought the sea back on top of the Egyptian army.

Then, after this mighty demonstration of God's power and of His care for His chosen people, we read next that they came to a place, three days journey into the wilderness, where there was no water (Exod. 15:22). Coming right on the heels of their mighty victory, and just after the Song of Moses celebrating that victory (Exod. 15:1-18), when you read about their lack of water, you think, "So what? God who just parted the sea can provide water." But instead we read, "The people grumbled at Moses" (Exod. 15:24). Then we read how they grumbled because there was no food (16:2), so the Lord provided manna. Then they grumbled because there was no meat, so the Lord provided quails (16:8-13). Then they ran out of water again, and grumbled again, and the Lord again provided water (17:3).

But, in their grumbling against Moses and disputing with him (17:2), they were really grumbling and disputing against the Lord (16:8). It was a bad testimony to the nations around them, that the

God who had provided a mighty deliverance for Israel would not also provide for their basic needs. It reflected badly on His love, His care, and His power to provide. The pagan nations around them, who were looking for a pretext to justify their rebellion against the living God, would scoff at God when they heard the grumbling and complaining of His people.

That's Paul's point in our text. We live in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation that refuses to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It's a world marked by grumbling and complaining. In the original temptation, Satan got Eve to doubt the goodness of God, and ever since he seeks to do the same. People won't trust in a God whose goodness is in question. So here are God's people, delivered from bondage to sin by God's mighty salvation through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. They have seen His power. Then they get into a wilderness situation, a trial where they run out of some basic resource and don't have a clue where it's going to come from.

What do they do? Do they grumble and dispute with God: "How could You do this to me when I've faithfully followed You?" Or, filled with joy in the Lord, do they shine forth as lights in the darkness? The testimony of Christ is at stake, especially when you're going through a difficult trial.

Paul says that three things should mark children of God (especially in trials): We should be blameless, innocent, and above reproach. *Blameless* has the nuance of *moral integrity as seen by others*. It points to our outwardly observable behavior, including our attitudes. Nothing in our lives should give an occasion for scandal, where unbelievers can look at how we live and say, "I thought he was a Christian! How can he be a Christian and live like that?" A great example of a blameless man is Daniel, who lived in Babylon and served in that pagan government. When his enemies wanted to find some charge against him to bring him down, because they were jealous of his position, they finally concluded, "We shall not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God" (Dan. 6:5). Daniel lived with integrity.

Also, we are to be *innocent*. This word focuses on *inward* moral integrity, which is the proper root of outwardly blameless behavior.

It focuses on what we are in our thought life before God. It's possible to put on a good front at church, but to be leading a double life. You can be an upright man at church, but be filled with lustful thoughts, always checking out the women. You can be a nice, smiling man at church, but be an angry tyrant with your family. All sin starts in our thoughts or mind (Mark 7:20-23). Thus we have to judge our sinful thoughts and take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) so that we will be not only blameless, but innocent.

Then we also must be *above reproach*. It's a summary of the other two and means, *without blemish*. It's an interesting Greek word, *amoma*. In Greek, the letter "a" negates something. So the word means, the opposite of *moma*. "Momus" was a carping Greek god who did nothing himself and found fault with everybody and everything. So those who gripe and find fault came to be called "Moma." But Paul says that the children of God are not to be fault-finders and grippers. We are to be without the blemish of complaining because we want this crooked and perverse generation to know that our Heavenly Father is a good, loving, and caring God. Our testimony of Christ should be uppermost in our minds so that we glorify Him by how we live.

2. Our testimony of Christ is tarnished by grumbling and disputing.

As I said, in the context Paul especially means grumbling and disputing against one another. But all grumbling and disputing is really against God who is sovereign over all our circumstances. "Grumbling" is used repeatedly of Israel in the wilderness, both in their complaining about Moses, as well as about their circumstances. Moses wasn't a perfect leader; no human leader is. But God had appointed him. So God said that their grumbling was against Him (Exod. 16:8). When we grumble, whether about a church leader we don't like or about some trial we're going through, we're really saying, "God, you're not doing a very good job of directing my life. Why am I out here in this wilderness? Why don't we have any water? Why did you appoint this man to lead us into this mess?" We're wrongly questioning God.

"Disputing" can either mean inward questioning or outward dissension (1 Tim. 2:8). Paul's command not to dispute does not

stifle honest discussion of differences on matters of doctrine or practice. Nor does it mean that it is wrong to question church leaders about problem areas. But it does confront our attitude in how we raise questions or disagreements. To dispute means to challenge in a selfish rather than submissive spirit. It means to assert your authority in an attempt to resist God and the leaders He has appointed, so that you don't have to submit to His Word. Satan was disputing when he said to Eve, "Indeed, has God said, ...? You shall not surely die!" (Gen. 3:1, 4). As Matthew Henry put it, "God's commands were given to be obeyed, not to be disputed" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary*, on Phil. 2:15, [Revell], p. 734).

The most appropriate example of grumbling and disputing I have ever experienced was when I was in the military. They think something's wrong if you're not complaining! Everyone gripes about the food, about the regulations, about the commanding officer, about the no-good guys in your company who don't carry their share of the work. If you don't complain, but do your work cheerfully as unto the Lord, you stick out like a sore thumb, or, in Paul's words, you shine as lights in the world.

We've seen that our testimony should be uppermost in our thinking so that it affects all our attitudes and behavior, to bring glory to our Heavenly Father. Grumbling and disputing tarnish that testimony. Thirdly,

3. Our testimony of Christ shines forth when we are filled with joy even in the midst of trials.

"Lights" means luminaries, things that shine. When do stars shine the brightest? When the night is the darkest. They shine, but not as brightly, when the moon is full. The stars shine during the day, but we can't see them because the light of the sun blocks them out. But on a dark night, they shine the brightest.

When can you bear the most effective witness for Jesus Christ? When you're in the darkest place! It may be a place of personal trial, where you radiate with God's joy in spite of your situation. Maybe you're in a dark situation at work or school, surrounded by crooked and perverse people. If you do all things without grumbling or disputing, but rather are blameless, innocent, and

above reproach, filled with joy in the Lord, you're going to shine! Many people will never read the Bible, but they do read you.

As Paul wrote, he was in a dark place, in prison, facing possible execution from the pagan Nero. Christian preachers in Rome were slandering him out of envy and strife. But Paul says that if his life is poured out as a drink offering on the altar, if it was upon the sacrifice and service of the Philippians' faith, he rejoiced and shared that joy with them. And he urges them to rejoice in their trials and to share that joy with him (2:17, 18).

Our lives shine as we put off grumbling and disputing and live in joy, especially during trials. But, also, we have a message we hold forth: "*the word of life*" (2:16). The gospel--that Christ died for our sins, that He arose victorious over sin and death, that He offers a full pardon from the wages of sin to all who will receive it by faith--that good news is the power of God to salvation for all who believe. The gospel is not just a set of propositions or doctrines to subscribe to, although it involves certain non-negotiable doctrines. The gospel brings the very *life* of God to those who are dead in their transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1-10). Those apart from Christ are not pretty good people who just need a little help to solve some of their problems. According to Scripture, they are spiritually dead, separated from the life of God. But when we hold forth to them the word of life, God can use it to raise them from the dead, to give them eternal life.

Thus our testimony is built on our life in Christ, a life free from grumbling and disputing, a life filled with the joy of Christ and the salvation He has given us, even in trials. But our testimony also involves the verbal witness of telling people the word of the gospel that imparts new life to all who believe. Every Christian should have this two-fold witness: a life of joy, which often opens the door to the second part, the message or word of life. Paul's witness in Philippi illustrates what he is teaching here. He had been unjustly beaten and thrown into prison and locked in the stocks. He had good cause to complain, but instead he and Silas sang hymns of praise to God. God sent an earthquake to open the jail. The jailer was prevented from taking his own life and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul shared the gospel message with him and his family. That's how we should bear witness of the Savior.

“But,” you say, “how can I have joy when things aren’t going well? My life is filled with problems. I’ve prayed, but the problems seem to get worse, not better. I live and work with difficult people. How can I have God’s joy in such trials?”

4. Our testimony of Christ can reflect joy even in trials if we live in view of Christ’s coming.

Paul could joyfully let his life be poured out as a drink offering because his focus was on “the day of Christ” when he would be rewarded because he did not run or labor in vain (2:16). The very words, “run” and “labor” point to the difficulty of serving Jesus Christ. It’s no Sunday School picnic! The imagery of being lights in the world also points to the difficulty of ministry, because lights give off light by being expended themselves. The candle is burned up by giving off light. Every servant of Christ has to die to self in obedience to Christ, as Grant preached last week. You may ask, “Why do that? Why endure hardship, why have people malign you, why wear yourself out serving Christ?” Because the day of Christ is coming, when He will render His rewards to every person. If people are there in heaven on that day, rescued from hell, gathered before the throne of Christ to sing His praises for all eternity because of your witness, don’t you think that you will say, “Any suffering I went through for the sake of the gospel was worth it”?

Living in the light of the day of Christ means that we must daily submit ourselves in every situation to a sovereign God. He is working all things after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). At present, He is allowing evil to go on. Living in this evil world, we often will suffer for the sake of righteousness. But we believe that He is sovereign, that His plan for the ages will be fulfilled, that Christ will return in power and glory to reign on His throne. So we can submit joyfully, without grumbling or disputing, to whatever He brings into our lives, knowing that He is in charge, and that His plan will not be thwarted.

Conclusion

A little old lady walked into a department store one day and was surprised when a band began to play and an executive pinned an orchid on her dress and handed her a crisp \$100 bill. She was the store’s millionth customer. Television cameras were focused on

her and reporters began interviewing her. "Tell me," one asked, "just what did you come here for today?"

The lady hesitated for a minute and then sheepishly answered, "I was on my way to the Complaint Department." How embarrassing!

But I wonder, if there had been a secret video camera recording your life this past week, how much grumbling would have been captured on film? Maybe you even came to church like that lady went to the department store, ready to air your complaints or to give someone a piece of your mind. But God meets you at the door and pins His Word on you: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, a child of God above reproach in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine forth as a light in the world." Grumble, grumble--NOT!

Discussion Questions

1. The psalmists sometimes complained to the Lord. Is this okay? How does it fit in with Paul's command in Phil. 2:14?
2. If you're in a bad situation (work, home, etc.) is it wrong to complain to those in charge? To complain to a friend?
3. If a Christian's life isn't what it should be, should he give verbal witness of Christ? How "perfect" must we be to bear witness?
4. Why is affirming the sovereignty of God in all things so important in learning to live with joy rather than with grumbling?

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