

Stop Complaining, Be a Compelling Witness (Philippians 2:14-15)

Please turn in God's Word to Phil 2 and as you do, I want to read from Jerry Bridges *Respectable Sins*: 'we often indulge in what I call the "respectable" or "acceptable"... sins without any sense of sin...unkind words about a brother or sister roll easily off our tongues without any awareness of wrongdoing. We harbor hurts over wrongs long past without any effort to forgive sin as God has forgiven us. We look down our religious noses at "sinners" in society...[we can be] quite judgmental toward the grosser sins of society but...pridefully unaware of [our] own personal sin... selfishness, our critical spirit, our impatience ... acceptable sins are subtle in the sense that they deceive us into thinking they are not so bad, or not thinking of them as sins, or even worse, not even thinking about them at all! ... we commit them without even thinking about them, either at the time or after'¹

One of those sins Phil 2:14 confronts us with is the sin of complaining. The evangelical church has spoken much on the sin of gay marriage but little on the sin of grumbling. Bridges' book *Respectable Sins* has related chapters on the sin of discontentment behind our disputing, ingratitude or irritability as the iniquity behind our inappropriate murmuring and venting. Today we'll look at v. 14-15, sermon title: Stop Complaining, Be a Compelling Witness.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world ...

The big idea is the words of Christians must be a shining contrast to a world that is crooked and complaining. To do nothing with grumbling starts in context in v. 3: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.* Humility is where it all starts

A booklet *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* says: 'The ego...is always making us think about how we look and how we are treated [ego as self-ambition, conceit in v. 3]. People sometimes say their *feelings* are hurt. But...It is the *ego* that hurts – my sense of self...Our feelings are fine! It is my ego that hurts. Walking around does not hurt my toes unless there is already something wrong with them. My ego would not hurt unless there was something terribly wrong with it. Think about it. It is very hard to get through a whole day without feeling snubbed or ignored or feeling stupid or getting down on ourselves....because there is something wrong with my ego...It is never happy. It is always drawing attention to itself...like a bloated stomach that is distended, it is also painful.'²

The cure in Phil 2 is I must decrease, Christ must increase. I need the mind of Christ in v. 5 and following, which will help me think of others and their interests more than and before me and mine, v. 4. I need to see lack of love, as v. 2 says, when my words aren't building up the unity of v. 2, and it's a lack of humility, as v. 3 says, when I grumble, as if I'm more significant than others, or when I want to dispute about my interests and concerns like v. 4, instead of deferring to those of others. Murmuring (KJV), grumbling, dumping, bellyaching, whining, emotionally vomiting or venting on others like v. 14 is selfish. Those who gripe reveal pride like v. 3. If you grumble, you reveal you're not humble or putting the needs of others above what you want to unload on them to make you feel better. When I complain, I reveal conceit, thinking I deserve better than how things going for such a one as I.

The Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives this diagnosis: 'murmurings [indicate] a lack of love, so disputings are always indicative of a lack of faith... There is nothing that leads to such havoc in the Christian life, there is nothing that so ruins [church] life, as this spirit of murmuring and disputing. It ruined the whole story of the ancient people [OT Israel], it has ruined the Christian life and experience of many a Christian... It leads not only to that, but to a poor testimony; it brings disgrace and disrepute upon the Christian name.'³

Outline: 1. Stop Complaining (v. 14)
 2. Be a Compelling Witness (v. 15)

Stop Complaining – NIV '*do everything without complaining or arguing*'
ALL THINGS – emphatic word order in original language, no exceptions.
ARGUING/DISPUTING – this word at the end of v. 14 is the result, when we complain, we become combative. Not just disagreeing, we're disputing, doubting, distrusting, debating, and this can lead to dividing of brethren. It's used of *opinions* we're not to quarrel about or judge others over (Rom 14:1, some versions say *doubtful* or *disputable* matters). It's translated *dissension* in 1 Tim 2:8 (NAS) where it's tied to sinful anger. In the gospels this word is used of *evil thoughts*, Pharisees challenging Jesus, not an honest respectful dialogues, but argumentative antagonistic cross-examinations. It's the word used of the disciples arrogantly arguing over which of them was the greatest

It isn't hard to see how that's a sin when we're fighting, dividing, striving in evil thoughts, but I want to spend more time on the first verb *complaining* or *grumbling* in v. 14. This isn't one we think about enough as sin or how big of a deal this sin is to God, so we need to see this evil the way God does

James 5:9 says ‘*Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!*’ (NKJV). God judges grumbling seriously, and condemns grumblers. James’ brother Jude wrote also of those the Lord will bring end times judgment on as the ‘*grumblers, complainers...*’ (Jude 15-16, other versions ‘*faultfinders*’ or ‘*malcontents*’). Turn to 1 Cor 10 and while you’re tuning there, this Greek word *gongusmos* is one of those words that sounds like what it means, a muttering mumbling. The idea ‘is a negative response to something unpleasant, inconvenient, or disappointing, arising from the self-centered notion that it is undeserved. The related verb is used of the resentful laborers who “grumbled at the landowner”...(Matt. 20:11) [or] Israelites in the wilderness who grumbled’⁴

1 Cor 10:1 *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea...* [that’s OT Israel in context, v. 10 calls Christians to not] *grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.* ¹¹ *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.* ¹² *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall* [context includes fall into the sin of grumbling]. ¹³ *No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape* [incl. sin of grumbling]...

v. 10 warns Christians not to grumble like Israelites who were destroyed for their sin of grumbling. What happened to complaining Israel is an example for Christians and warning to heed lest we fall. It’s a temptation common to man then and now, but we can’t say it’s beyond our ability to escape it, it is a destructive evil but God is faithful to help us endure without complaint. v. 10 is summed up by Ps 106:25, where it says the Israelites ‘*grumbled in their tents...Therefore He swore to them That He would cast them down in the wilderness*’ (NAS). God is very displeased with grumbling in homes or hearts. He brought destruction for it, and Paul argues that’s for our example.

In Ex. 16 right after the exodus, Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, but the inspired insight of Moses in reply was: ‘*the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD*’ (v. 8). Grumbling against leadership or life’s frustrations is very American, but it’s an abomination against a God who sovereignly orchestrates all things in our lives that we complain about. If God’s working all things together for my good, grumbling is against Him.

Bridges: "To tolerate [this] in our spiritual lives is as dangerous as to tolerate cancer in our bodies...If I complain about the difficult circumstances of my life, I impugn the sovereignty and goodness of God and tempt my listener to do the same. In this way, my sin "metastasizes" into the heart of another..."¹⁵

Num 11: *And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them...* [that's how the Lord thinks about His people complaining about misfortunes and how miserable their life is]

Num 14:2 *And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the wilderness...Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt" ...*²⁶ *the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,*²⁷ *"How long shall this **wicked** congregation **grumble against me**? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble **against me**.* [they grumbled against human leadership, but God says they're grumbling ultimately against me. Complaining isn't a 'weakness,' it's a wickedness the Lord takes personal]

Num 14:28 goes on: *'As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you:*²⁹ *your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me,*³⁰ *not one shall come into the land ...*³⁶ *And the men who...made all the congregation grumble...died by plague*

Paul says if you think you're standing firm, take heed lest you fall as well. Num 16:41 *'...the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against...'*⁴⁴ *and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,*⁴⁵ *"Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment."* God said *'make an end of their grumbings against me, lest they die,'* 17:10. That's not just OT, Rom 1 says of us who aren't grateful we deserve to die.

Lam 3:39 *Why should any...man, Offer complaint in view of his sins?*⁴⁰ *Let us examine and probe our ways, And let us return to the LORD.*⁴¹ *We lift up our heart and hands Toward God in heaven;*⁴² *We have transgressed and rebelled...* (NAS). That's what Paul calls us to do in the next chapter of this letter to the Corinthians, to examine ourselves. 1 Cor 10:10 includes the sin of grumbling like OT Israel, the sin that destroyed them can destroy us. But the good news in v. 13 is God is faithful, the temptation to complain won't ever be more than your or I can bear, there's grace to endure and escape sin.

Turn to Col 3 for a very practical application of what to do when we have a complaint against another person. Lam 3 asks how can I offer complaints in view of my sins, especially since God often wiped out sinful complainers in the past? If I recognize that God graciously let me keep breathing despite all the times I've grumbled, that should make me humbled by His mercy and grateful and merciful in how I speak of sinners or circumstances He allows. Col 3:13 commands '*bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another* [no qualification, any complaint you have] *forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive* [same idea as heart forgiveness in prayer Mk 11:25 '*if you have anything against anyone*']

Paul doesn't say if they ask forgiveness and ask it just right, bear with them and forgive them. No, it's if you have a complaint, go God in prayer and forgive in your heart then and there. Ask His help to bear with the source. This isn't based on a good apology, this is based on gospel grace you have. The best way to deal with most offenses is not to take offense and certainly not to share that offense with others, especially in light of our offensive sin against God. Love covers a multitude of sins, there are sins that multiply or make relationships difficult that do need addressing in concern and grace, but never in complaining and grumbling. Speak to God about it much first.

4:2 *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it **with thanksgiving**.*

³ *At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word ...* ⁶ *Let your speech always be **gracious, seasoned with salt**...* that's for the purpose of gospel witness on gracious grateful lips, not grumbling.

That takes us back to Phil 2 and to our 2nd point: **Be a compelling witness**

The reason we need to stop complaining or grumbling speech is so we can have compelling gracious speech instead, as the salt of the earth and as the light of the world. We need to stop disputing to have a compelling witness. Phil 2:15 says it this way: *that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life*

...

That could also be translated 'holding for the word of life,' kind of like the Statue of Liberty holding the torch to people from all around the world that see her. We have a message for the world's tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to be free, Christ's liberty from sin. We're to lift up the light of the gospel to the wretched tempest-tossed people of every shore, lifting up the Word like a light to their feet and lamp for the path to heaven's golden door

The big idea is the words of Christians must be a shining contrast to a world that is crooked and complaining. Those living in the darkness grumble as they stumble through the darkness, but if you're a child of God, don't whine, let your light shine! Don't join the murmuring sinners around you, join the mission to reach them by your witness and your words that are so unlike our hopeless and negative culture. If our words in all things are positive and not argumentative, the difference will be evident to a hopeless generation, and some may ask the reason for the hope that's within us that is shining out of us in the way we speak. In v. 2 the context is the church's unity and love.

A main point of v. 12-18 has been summed up as 'Working against disunity is a crucial element in working out salvation before a watching world.'⁶ It's also a listening world that hears complaining but needs compelling witness. Paul's goal is higher than us just not expressing discontent or not disputing with fellow Christians, he's concerned with Christian disunity for the gospel sake, and ultimately for God's glory in loving words to or about one another

Turn to Acts 2 and listen to Christ's prayer for us, Jn 17 *that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* ²² *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,* ²³ *I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

Christ is praying for those who would believe through the apostles holding forth the word of life. Weeks later that prayer began to be answered, Acts 2:

¹ *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were **all together** in one place...*

You know the story, God's Spirit came like fire, like lights shining in the midst of them, and Peter holds forth the gospel, pointing them to Jesus the light of the world. In v. 22 he calls them to call on the name of the Lord to be saved. Peter preaches Lordship salvation in v. 34-36 and he calls them to repent in v. 38 for forgiveness and to be baptized. That's the word of life to you today I'm holding forth, repent, be baptized, turn from your sins and trust in Jesus as Savior who died for your sin of complaining and your other sins, and who rose again as Lord so all who call upon His name He'll save.

Peter weeks earlier was complaining, but now in v. 40 Peter's a compelling witness, letting his light shine, and in v. 40 he calls them to be saved from a crooked generation (same phrase as Phil 2:15). It's the Greek word we get *scoliosis* from, when the spine is crooked, but the gospel makes right a soul.

Now watch how the early church let their light shine to the crooked, twisted dark world around them. v. 44: *And all who believed were together and had all things in common.*⁴⁵ *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*⁴⁶ *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts* [that's opposite of grumbling and disputing in Phil 2:14],⁴⁷ *praising God and having favor with all the people* [that's Phil 2:15, blameless, w/out blemish to world]. *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

That's a compelling witness when believers stick together, sacrifice to care for each other, attend worship together, have people into their homes, share meals and share life. That's how the church can be like a lighthouse to this dark world to show the way so sinners don't shipwreck their souls. In our materialistic culture that seeks possessions and individuality, this shines as a counter-culture that sells possessions and sets aside self to help others. The church expressing gratitude instead of grumbling before the world is key to letting our light shine. Christians today can be quick to complain about how the church falls short, but in those days they contributed to help fill in any needs. Many today have a jaded heart about the church, but generous hearts are what the church needs, and that starts with you in how you speak. In our day many are quick to open their mouth when they shouldn't and to take pot shots at the church or people in it, but in Acts 2 they opened pocketbooks and opened hearts and their homes which opened doors for the word of life.

Peter was there in Acts 2 and experienced that and later wrote in 1 Peter 4:8 we need to keep loving '*each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*'⁹ *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling ... If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory'* (NIV)

If you look at Acts 6 Peter may be thinking of how in showing hospitality to widows, grumbling later arose in the midst of serving, church growing pains **6:1** *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution* [i.e., meals ministry, benevolence, a people group now complaining and disputing, like Phil 2:14]
² *And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*

That word 'serve' in Greek is *deaconeo*, the verb form of deacon. Preaching by the apostles was not to be given up to *deacon-ing*, but serving of widows and preserving unity was essential, and that all-important duty needed other godly spiritual wise leaders who can be shock-absorbers and unity builders.

³ *Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.* ⁴ *But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*” That's the biblical non-negotiable for those preaching and ministering the Word, later NT writings call them pastors/elders who have the role of overseers, and the later NT writings also mention deacons, recognized servant-leaders who fill that role we see here. Deacons or other servant-leader are critical to build up unity, to be spiritual shock-absorbers, and help meet the practical needs of the body beyond what the elders can, so the word of life might be held forth

In v. 5 the congregation was involved, in v. 6 the men were brought to and prayed for and publically appointed by the leaders: ⁷ *And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

That's exactly what Phil 2 is talking about, and you can go back there. The word of God or the word of life shines as it's held forth by a church that's working together under servant-leaders to not let complaining or disputing divide us. Grumbling hinders the gospel and glory and grace from shining. So *'Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world ...'*

That language comes from the OT, where God's children proved faithless *'children because they are blemished, they are a crooked and twisted generation.'* Paul's saying don't be like OT Israel, don't become the crooked complaining generation, be a contrast and witness to it. Don't let blemishes of grumbling or disputing darken your testimony, if you're God's children: *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 5). That's what it's all about as our kids sing 'this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...hide it under a bushel, no, I'm gonna let it shine...Don't let Satan poof it out...' The way to let your light go out is to let complaining go out of your mouth. Don't do it.

Hear the call of the Kingdom, To be children of light

With the mercy of heaven, The humility of Christ [Phil 2:5-8]

...Loving all that is right That the life of Christ may shine through us⁷

The humility of Christ takes us back to v. 5-8. We can't obey v. 14-15 if He didn't first obey for us. There's only one person who ever did all things with no grumbling or disputing sinfully. We need to look to the only Man who was ever fully blameless and innocent of this sin, the Son of God who was also the Lamb of God, an unblemished sacrifice for us. Jesus just like Israel wandered a wilderness without food and like them He was tempted but He never complained or argued with His Father. He never said a mumblin word all the way to the cross. He is the Light of the world holding forth the word of life to people He called a 'twisted generation' and He calls us to join Him to reflect His light as the moon reflects the sun. Turn from respectable sins. Don't whine, let the light shine. Stop complaining, be a compelling witness

¹ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, p. 19-25.

² Tim Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, p. 16-17.

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Joy*, p. 192-3.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 179–180.

⁵ Bridges, p. 24, 26.

⁶ Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, NIVAC series, p. 143.

⁷ Getty Music, "Hear the Call of the Kingdom."