

Lesson 9

Complaining and Arguing

Philippians 2:14-16

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. What is the worst sin a person can commit? Is it adultery, homosexuality, murder or rape? In light of the total holiness of God, it is difficult to say that any sin is any worse than any other sin. However, if we read the Old Testament carefully, we will find that the sin of complaining, grumbling and murmuring was a sin which brought great judgment from God. God hates a grumbling and complaining spirit because complaining is the opposite of a joyful spirit and God wants His people to be joyful.
- B. Complaining seems to be the American way of life. Most conversations are complaints about the government, the economy, the taxes we pay and even about the weather. Among Christians, we hear complaints about the sermon – too long, too dry and too pointed. Or there are complaints about the congregation – too large, too cold, too small, too emotional or too impersonal. Complaining is not just an American pastime. It is a human race pastime because all men do have a sin nature which tends towards the negative rather than the positive. Complaining is a spiritual problem and it has to be dealt with and spiritually defeated.
- C. Even the Philippian Church, which was so warm, loving and giving towards the Apostle Paul, had the problem of complaining and arguing. They had not grown up spiritually in this area yet. This section on complaining and arguing must be put in the context of the Book of Philippians. In 2:12-13, Paul has been exhorting these Philippians to work out their own salvation because God was at work in them (***Phil. 2:12-13: Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.***). In Paul's mind, the working out aspect was directly related to having a spirit of unity in the congregation. He desired that they should "stand firm in one spirit" (1:27) and be "likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (2:2). One of the ways we know God is working in us is that there is a spirit of love, unity and caring in the local church. The way we are to achieve this goal is to stop complaining and arguing, and this is one of the ways we work out our salvation.

II. NEGATIVE ATTITUDES WHICH KEEP A CHRISTIAN FROM WORKING OUT SALVATION 2:14

A. Complaining (14a): *Do everything without complaining....*

1. Paul is concerned that these Philippians work out their salvation by working on their attitudes about life. He wants them to have obedience in attitude as well as action. The Philippians were externally obedient and yet did not have an internal obedient attitude because they were grippers and complainers. It is like the school boy who had just been told to sit down by his teacher. He sits down in external obedience but all the time is saying, "On the outside I may be sitting down but on the inside I am still standing up!" This kind of grudging obedience is not obedience at all. It is only external conformity. NOTE: It is possible to come to church, Bible under the arm, pray, give, sing and listen to a rousing sermon while all the time inwardly we are griping and complaining about our job, our church, our preacher, our wife, our husband, our children, our school, our parents or whatever. God will not be pleased with our lives until we honestly deal with these internal grumblings and rid our lives of them.

2. This word "complaining" is interesting to trace in the Bible. In 1 Peter 4:9 it says, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." Apparently some of these Christians were complaining about all the house guests they were having to entertain. Often guests take advantage of gracious hospitality. They stay too long; they eat too much; they leave a mess; they don't help out. Benjamin Franklin said, "Guests are like fish. After they are around the house three days, they begin to stink." Peter says, "Don't have a negative attitude about hospitality; don't complain, don't grumble. Use your home for God. Do not entertain regretfully or reluctantly." In 1 Corinthians 10:7-10 a reference is made to Israel in the Old Testament. ***(Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.)*** These Israelites committed idolatry, indulged in orgies and committed sexual immorality. We say, "How horrible. What a bunch of sinners. They deserved whatever God gave them: But notice it also says, "And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel." Grumbling (complaining) is put in the same category with these other gross sins. Israel was guilty of complaining even when God did miracle after miracle for them in the desert. God had just opened the Red Sea for them and destroyed Pharaoh and the most powerful army in the world at that time. Yet, three days later the people were complaining about no water (***Exo. 15:22-24: Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"***). The people gripped and complained against their God-appointed leadership (***Exo. 16:2: In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Exo. 17:3: Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?"***). God's response to their

grumbling was severe. He brought them plagues, diseases, enemies and even death. Because of Korah's rebellion and griping attitude, he gathered a great following against Moses, God's appointed leader, and God judged Korah and 250 other leaders. Not only this, but 14,700 died by a plague because they refused to stop complaining (**Num. 16:49: But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah.**). NOTE: If God hates the sin of grumbling and complaining so much in the Old Testament, how much more does He hate it in the New Testament when we have so much more revelation? God may not kill us today for a negative, griping, complaining spirit but He has His own ways of disciplining us when we refuse to be thankful and grateful for His sovereign dealings with us.

3. Notice Paul does not say, "Do some things without complaining" or "It is alright to complain if there is really something wrong." No, he says, "Do everything without complaining." We should respond to negative circumstances with a positive spirit. Paul is not saying we should never point up sin, or go to the proper sources when there is a grievance. But he does say we should not complain externally or internally about negative situations but seek to deal with them in a biblical manner.

4. Why is the sin of grumbling so despicable in God's eyes? Why does He discipline His people so severely when it crops up? Grumbling denies the sovereignty of God. When we complain, we are ultimately complaining against a sovereign God -- His institutions, His laws, His providential dealings, His leaders. When the Israelites grumbled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, Moses said to them in Exodus 16:8, "You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD." NOTE: This is the exact truth Paul is trying to teach us in Philippians 2:13-14. It is a sovereign God who is working in us to will and to act according to his good purpose. It is God who directs or allows things to come into our lives to make us trust Him and grow up spiritually. Yet, if we are grumbling, we are challenging God's sovereignty in our lives. If we really believe Romans 8:28, then we have nothing to grumble about because God is going to use circumstances to bring about His purposes for us.

5. Complaining is the opposite of joy. Joy, you remember, is the theme of the Book of Philippians. It is mentioned 16 times. Joyful living sees God as sovereign and in control of everything, making everything work out for His own good pleasure. Grumbling is to forget and deny the sovereignty of God, believing that everything is working against us and God is responsible for it.

B. *Or arguing* (14b)

1. Another reason God hates complaining is that it disrupts Christian unity, complaining brings with it fighting, arguing and verbal wars. In the wilderness wanderings of Israel, whenever there was grumbling, disunity was not far

behind such as the water incident in the desert (**Exo. 17:7: *And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"***). A grumbler soon begins to find fault with every one and everything but himself. He also begins to point his finger, putting the blame on anyone but himself. Grumblers make people think they are right – there are always negative people who are ready to pick up on any cause -- for they are able to convince people that their cause is just, so they begin to draw people around them, forming a divisive party, challenging whatever the establishment might be at the time. Grumbling in a local church is just one step away from an argument and just two steps away from a division. A grumbling and divided local church is a defeated local church. NOTE: Beware of any Christian who is always negative, griping and complaining. He or she has a serious internal spiritual problem which must be honestly dealt with before God. We know also that a griping spirit can be infectious and soon affect a whole local church. Christians must deal severely with their own complaining spirits and help others improve complaining to see how destructive a negative attitude is to the unity of the body of Christ.

III. POSITIVE ACTIONS WHICH INDICATE GOD IS WORKING SALVATION IN THE CHRISTIAN 2:15-16

A. Positive Character Witness (15)

1. ***So that you may become blameless and pure***, -- By not griping and complaining, Christians project a certain image to the non-Christian world. We need to become faultless and sincere. Obviously Paul knows we Christians cannot be perfect in this life. We all fail at times. But we all can work hard at curbing a negative attitude as we believe in a sovereign God to do all things right and well. The unsaved world does nothing but gripe, complain, moan and groan about life and they are quick to see a critical attitude on the part of Christians towards one another.
2. ***Children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation***. -- The Christian should give the world no cause to rebuke Christ or the Church of Jesus Christ. By nature, the world is morally warped and has a distorted viewpoint of life, for it has no desire to conform to the law of God. This is their natural bent to grumble and complain because they have no understanding that God is in control of this world. When Christians gripe and murmur, they are saying to the non-Christian world, "God really doesn't exist or if He does He can't control my circumstances." Why would any non-Christian want to follow a God who is not in control of life. Yet, when the Christian is positive and joyful in the midst of crisis, the non-Christian sits up and takes notice and says, "Well, maybe there is something to this Christianity."
3. ***In which you shine like stars in the universe***, -- The world is crooked, depraved, perverted and at best it can only twist truth. Yet, Christians are lights

in this world. As we shine as lights in the unsaved world, this is definite evidence that God is working out a great salvation in us. NOTE: God's plan is that Christians are to make an impact on this world. If we say to the world, "Trust Christ for He can give you meaning, purpose and joy and then gripe and complain, looking like we just ate sour grapes, we have lost our testimony before men. Many Christians look like and act like they have been eating dill pickles all week. The non-Christian looks on and says, "What a miserable bunch. Christians never have any fun. They are always griping about something. Their long, somber, harsh faces make me want to run as fast as I can from Christianity." Negative Christians cause people to say, "Christianity is not for me!" NOTE: Paul seems to indicate that each and every true Christian does shine as a light in this lost world. If we are not shining for Christ, we ought to ask the hard question, "Am I really a Christian?"

- B. Positive Verbal Witness (16a): ***As you hold out the word of life*** – Christians are not only to have a moral character which makes them shine as lights, but they are to extend forth the message of Jesus Christ to a dying world. When we witness for Christ, it is evidence that God is working out His salvation in us. A witness for Christ must be by lips as well as life. Unsaved men and women will not listen to the Christian if he is negative, griping, complaining, moaning and groaning about life. No person would want to serve a God who makes His people miserable.

In one of my previous churches, I had the opportunity to talk to some fine church women who all claimed to be Christians. We were talking about giving a verbal witness for Christ, and of the eight women only one felt that a Christian should give a verbal witness for Christ. They all felt Christians should live a good life, however. I pointed out that if a perfect Christian man were to walk the streets of Roanoke for ten years no one would ever know the message of the gospel unless it was told. The perfect Christian would only be known as an outstanding moralist. It is the Christian's duty to give a verbal witness for Christ.

- B. Positive Reward At The Judgment Seat (16b): ***In order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.*** -- Paul was looking forward to the Judgment Seat of Christ at Christ's second advent. As the Christians at Philippi work out their salvation it will prove that Paul's work among them was not in vain and Paul will be rewarded for his labors. Yet, it is also true that, as Christians seek for unity, demonstrating a humble spirit of thinking others more important than themselves, working hard not to challenge the sovereignty of God by complaining, living a godly life in this depraved world, shining as lights, holding forth the Word of God, there will be eternal reward for the Christian.

IV. CONCLUSION

- A. Saved. Christian, we must face the fact that a complaining spirit is a bad testimony for Christ. Instead of grumbling, we should be thankful and joyful which will make an impact for Christ. Be honest, what is there in your life that would be attractive to

an unsaved person? Do you project to the world that a sovereign God is in control? Can you imagine what kind of an impact the Apostle Paul would have had before the Praetorian Guard if while in that Roman jail, they would have heard him say, "This jail stinks! The food is awful! The conditions are atrocious! These chains are killing me! I wish these negative Christians would stop visiting me! I'm being slandered unjustly! I hate to pray because God doesn't answer anyway!" This kind of complaining and griping would have turned off every Roman soldier guarding Paul and they would have said, "This guy is nothing but a sour-puss. Christianity is not for me!" But instead Paul projected joy, confidence and assurance that God was in control of all things and he found reasons to be thankful even though his circumstances were miserable. Paul did not just give external obedience to his circumstances. He gave internal obedience and was glad and joyful in his circumstances because He knew it was all somehow part of God's plan for his life. Christians, what kind of impact do you have on this depraved world for Christ? Do the unsaved see you conquering in areas they know they are failing? Can they see Christ in you?

B. Unsaved.

1. If you are a non-Christian, I want to tell you on the authority of the Word of God and by my own experience that Christ does give joy, peace, happiness and security. He does answer the basic questions of life and death. He does give a person a new reason for living.
2. To be a Christian does not mean we will be free of problems. Nor does it mean that life is always a big party. To become a Christian means we understand that God is in control of all things; that there is forgiveness for our sins; that there is eternal life for those who believe in Christ. When we receive Christ, He gives us the ability to begin to conquer negative attitudes so that when we gripe or complain or do any other sin we are deeply convicted about it and want to rid ourselves of it. Christ is the answer to life and death and He does make His people joyful.