

“The heart drifts toward complaint as if by gravitational pull—after all, complaint seems a reasonable response to a sequence of disappointing events...” So writes Christian author, Jeff Manion, in his book, *The Land Beyond*. Manion continues ...

“Generally, you don't have to extend an invitation for complaint to show up. It arrives as an uninvited guest. You return home from yet another frustrating day to discover that complaint has moved into your guest room, unpacked its luggage, started a load of laundry, and is rooting through your fridge. Even as you seek to dislodge complaint—as you move its bags to the curb and change the locks—it crawls back through the guest room window. Complaint resists eviction. Before we know it, complaint feels right because it is familiar...”

It saddens me to admit... that I can identify with this author's description. ... Perhaps you can too.

Jim Cymbala is the pastor of a mega-church in New York. He once wrote...

About 20 years ago, I said something impromptu to the new members standing in a row across the front of the church. As we received them, the Holy Spirit prompted me to add, "And now, I charge you that if you ever hear another member speak an unkind word of criticism or slander against anyone—myself, an usher, a choir member, or anyone else—that you stop that person in mid-sentence and say,

'Excuse me—who hurt you? Who ignored you? Who slighted you? Was it Pastor Cymbala? Let's go to his office right now. He'll apologize to you, and then we'll pray together so God can restore peace to this body. But we won't let you talk critically about people who aren't present to defend themselves.'

"I'm serious about this. I want you to help resolve this kind of thing immediately. And know this: If you are ever the one doing the loose talking, we'll confront you."

To this day, every time we receive new members, I say much the same thing. That's because I know what most easily destroys churches. It's not crack cocaine, government oppression, or even lack of funds. Rather it's gossip and slander that grieves the Holy Spirit.

Satan hates a growing church. When a church is growing and prospering, he will try to do something to upset the church and hinder its work. The early church in Jerusalem was really prospering. So his tactic was to get the church members murmuring. Few things hinder the church more than murmuring in the church. When an individual is growing and prospering spiritually, Satan will also cause some sort of trouble to come along in an attempt to stop the spiritual progress.

When Satan does not succeed in stopping the church with a frontal assault, he attacks from within. ... We saw his frontal attacks through persecution in chapter 4... Israel's national leaders had taken action that was based on jealousy. They had all of the Apostles imprisoned and flogged... and then they commanded them to never speak again in the name of Jesus. But the Apostles were undaunted by this frontal assault. The church continued to increase in numbers. ... Next came an attack through moral subversion in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5. That was dealt with promptly and the church continued to grow. Today... as we open chapter 6... the enemy will try yet another strategy... (one of his most common ploys that he uses today) - the malignant cancer of grumbling.

We have to remain vigilant to Satan's relentless attacks. Today's passage of study is a vital warning to us.

Who among us has not witnessed his favored strategy...(?) — an invitation not sent... a job unnoticed... a critical comment overheard... a judgmental look... a name forgotten... a social gaffe... jealousy over something that really does not matter... and it gets introduced to a group of people who have hearts that drift toward complaints as if by gravitational pull. ... The result is that bitter dissention ignites and it so quickly spreads. ... (LISTEN)... When the murmuring begins... the devil smiles.

Before we get to our passage... I would first like to explain a few things that our author (Dr. Luke) assumes that his readers already know.

The Roman Empire had learned from the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires that the best way to keep control over the people you have conquered... was to deport and scatter them. They shuffled people all around by relocating them to places unfamiliar to them... Israel had many people living within its borders who were not Jews... and other lands outside of Israel had Jews... who had been relocated there by their Roman conquerors. ... Gentiles became curious about their new Jewish neighbors... and over the years many Gentiles converted to Judaism... They were attracted to the God of the Old Testament... These converts (non-ethnic Jews) were known as "Hellenists."

There is one more thing to know that will help us understand today's passage. There was a Jewish belief that in the last days... when the resurrection occurred... the first to rise would be those buried in the soil of

Jerusalem. ... Those bodies buried outside of the Holy City... would first have to burrow underground however many hundreds or thousands of miles back to Jerusalem to enjoy the resurrection. ... Consequently many Jews moved to Jerusalem in their latter years. And this produced an abundance of Hebrew and Hellenist widows... who had outlived their husbands. Resentful, the native Aramaic-speaking Jews discriminated against the Hellenistic Jews, whom the Pharisees held in utter contempt, considering them second-class Israelites.

Then came Pentecost, and thousands of Aramaic-speaking Jews plus hundreds of Hellenistic Jews became one in Christ. However, conversion (wonderful as it was) did not erase all their prejudices. The Hebrew Jews had been taught all their life to reject and despise anything that even remotely looked ... or smelled of a gentile. Old and ingrained ways often die hard.

As we pick up the narrative of our passage today... the Greek-speaking widows felt they were being shorted. ... When the other widows received two loaves of bread... they only got one. ... At least that is the way they saw it. ... So "complaints" arose. "*Our Hebrew-speaking brothers are favoring their own people.*" ... The offense may have been more imagined than actual... but that made no difference to those who felt the sting of prejudice.

(LISTEN)... Cliques and self-important groups... wherever you find them... are always dangerous. ... There are certain sins that are inevitable to cliques... which must be guarded against. They are the sins of...

- being exclusive and shutting others out.
- feeling superior and above others.
- believing one has more rights than others.
- thinking one is due more attention than others.

Acts 6:1

The Greek believers were murmuring against the Hebrew believers. ... It was not the supposedly neglected widows who were complaining... but it was some of the Greek men who were doing the complaining. ... The complaining reflects a race rivalry that has no place in the church... and as we have already acknowledged... it is very difficult to crucify the flesh and keep these kinds of deeply embedded feelings from resurfacing... even as believers.

The word for “complaint” that is used in verse 1 is “γογγυσμοζ.” Literally it means “whisperings” and it emphasizes a “smoldering discontent,” which if it is not handled immediately... it can split a church.

As noted... prejudice is an awful threat to any church. But so is murmuring! This church was threatened by two separate wrongs – prejudice on one side... and murmuring on the other. ... (Both needed correction.) The murmuring revealed... the complainers were more concerned about getting than giving. ... They were selfish in that they were more concerned about their own needs than that of others. ... It was a matter of getting upset about one's rights and privileges... more than their responsibilities. ... It did not show charity to others... but was concerned about the charity being shown to them. ... It is a pathetic attitude that plagues many churches. This

had nothing to do with spiritual needs... but was entirely about material needs.

Facing the problem immediately and openly... *the Twelve* gather the congregation... and they point out (yet) another threat - distraction from their calling, *the ministry of prayer and the word of God*. So they would be dealing with a triple threat to the stability of the church: prejudice, murmuring, and distraction (from their calling.)

Acts 6:2-4

Some people may read these verses and become very uncomfortable. Who did these Apostles think they were...? Did they regard themselves to be better than Jesus...? Jesus washed feet – and they wont even set a plate for a hungry woman! Didn't Jesus say...

Matthew 23:11 (ESV)

The greatest among you shall be your servant.

Let me direct your attention to the wording in verse 2... '*not right*' ... This word (aresko)... can easily be translated '*not pleasing*'... It is not pleasing to God..." ... God is not pleased when we abandon the priorities that He has called us to.

Now... let's be very careful here! ... The Apostles statement does not imply that (so-called) 'spiritual' ministries... such as teaching the Word of God... and prayer are superior... in the sense of being more important to God... than 'practical' ministries such as distributing food. ... *Both* activities are

referred in our passage by the identical Greek term, diakonia... which means 'service.' (Here in verse 2... it is used of the “distributing food” and in verse 4 “diakonia” is used of the “teaching and prayer.”) ... Both types of ministry are “service”... and please notice how both require spiritual qualities. ... The Apostles laid out (in verse 3) spiritual qualifications for selecting who would distribute food to the widows. (I will come back to this in a moment...)

We are to notice, here, that God calls each of His servants to a particular work... and we are not to abandon it for another. We are to please God by doing whatever it is that He calls us to do.

This answer that is given by the Apostles... highly suggests that the murmuring of the Hellenists... was that the Apostles were not doing enough. “*They should be more personally involved in the distribution of the food – but they’re not!*” Twice (once in verse 2 and once in verse 4) it is expressed that the Apostles related that they had been assigned a different work by God. This double emphasis suggests to me that part of the complaining... was that these Apostles were not doing what they should have been doing.

There are times... when others in the church will assume that they have a better understanding about the ministry God has called someone else to perform... than the understanding of the person God has actually called to do it. ... But there is to be a far greater concern... that every believer must give their utmost attention to.

Have you ever diligently sought an understanding of what it is... that God has called you to do...? (LISTEN) Philippians 2:12 says that we are all to work this out with fear and trembling. We need to be intensely concerned that we are getting it right – and pleasing God by not being distracted from it. ... Determine what God is calling you to do. (Then... take a page out of the playbook of the Apostles, here.) Don't allow murmuring and grumbling from others OR yourself knock you off course from it!

The solution that the Apostles gave was to select other workers so the Apostles could continue to do the work that God called them to do. The selection process involved considering three main qualifications - a good reputation... being filled with wisdom... and being filled with the Spirit. ... When we appoint officers in the church — for example... treasurers and administrators of various church projects — we ought to look for these three qualifications.

Of these three... the third seems most frequently neglected. ... Growing up in a Baptist church... attending one in college and later in seminary... I have witnessed times when people have been placed into positions of leadership and in administrative roles... simply because they were administratively capable... had business experience... occupied a certain status in the community – but had no evidence of the fullness of the Spirit. ... In a previous ministry... I inherited (when I first came to that church) some rich and influential people on the leadership board... but they possessed very few spiritual qualifications. ... It was nice that they brought in money and other resources to the church. But the church seemed little more than a sanctified social club... than a spiritual movement with significant life changing and world-wide impact. This pattern has become a serious

problem in evangelical churches and para-church relief organizations today.

This practice is wrong on at least three counts. (1) When it happens... we are ignoring the fact that in the body of Christ everything we do is for the Lord. All service is spiritual in nature. We need workers to do the work who are skilled in the project as well as having a vibrant relationship with God.

(2) Ignoring spiritual qualifications reflects a wrong idea of Christian community... the key of which is the spiritual unity we share as members of the body of Christ. ... As each person makes a contribution... the body of Christ moves forward. ... But we enter into this body through a spiritual tie with Christ. ... If we do not have such a tie... we cannot participate in body ministry.

(3) God doesn't need the resources of the ungodly. He receives a lot of glory by using the weak and providing from the most unexpected sources.

It is far better to wait until we can find the right people... rather than do churchy work by employing the wrong people. ... We may accumulate several flashy bells and whistles... but in the long run it can take the church in a wrong direction.

Acts 6:5

The church acted in love and humility. ... Neither the apostles nor anyone else had ruffled feelings. ... The apostles and Hebrew believers (thousands of them) responded in love and humility. Everyone of the seven men chosen were Hellenist Jews. ... Their names were Greek... not Jewish. The

largest segment of the church had humbled itself to the minority. What an example!

Furthermore... the fact that they were all Hellenist believers points toward God moving the church out into the whole world. ... Christ had commissioned the first disciples to go into the whole world (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). ... Now, He was providentially preparing the church for the day that was soon to come... the day of persecution that would scatter the believers all over the world (Acts 8:1-4). ... These seven men... being Hellenist ministers of the Jerusalem Church... could touch the Gentile world wherever they went — by language... by training... and by culture. ... God was preparing the church (without their knowing it) for the day when they were to be scattered all over the world.

Acts 6:6

The group was given a special commissioning service to help make them recognizable as the appointed ones, and to give them the charge they needed to the work.

What is the meaning of the laying on of hands? ... In Leviticus during the Old Testament sacrifices... the sinner would put his hand on the head of the animal to be sacrificed... which signified that the animal to be offered was taking his place. ... The offering was identified with the sinner.

When the apostles put their hands on the heads of the deacons... it meant that now the deacons would be partners with them. ... They were together in this service. ... It designated that these men were set aside for this office... denoting they were representatives of the Apostles in their service.

Acts 6:7

The word of God continued to increase in spite of widespread opposition and “...**a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith**” – In the Greek... (what is called) an imperfect active tense is employed... which emphasizes repetition; “one priest right after the other became obedient to the faith...”

But you will notice that nothing is said about satisfying the needs of the widows. ... Verse 7 seems to imply (as it concludes this narrative) that the real issue was the ministry of prayer and the Word of God. As Dr. Luke concludes this story for us... he shows us that all of this has been about advancing the Kingdom... It has not primarily been about properly feeding the widows... or even as much about the issues of prejudice and murmuring. Front and center to this passage is the description of how God established His church on earth in the midst of opposition.

Yet we are given a very powerful lesson about prejudice and the destructive nature of murmuring. These need to be confronted immediately whenever discovered in the church.

There is a story that has been around for a while... related by Ken Taylor in his book, *Romans for the Family Hour*.

One hot day a family traveling down the highway between Johnstown and Jamestown stopped at Farmer Jones's place to ask for a drink of water, which he gladly gave them.

"*Where are you headed?*" he asked them.

"We are moving from Johnstown to Jamestown to live," they told him. "Can you tell us what the people there are like?"

"Well, what kind of people did you find where you lived before?" Farmer Jones asked.

"Oh, they were the very worst kind!" the people said. *"They were gossipy and unkind and indifferent. We are glad to move away."*

"Well, I am afraid you will find the same in Jamestown," replied Farmer Jones.

The next day another car stopped, and the same conversation took place. These people were moving to Jamestown, too.

"What kind of neighbors will we find there?" they asked.

"Well," said Farmer Jones, *"what kind of neighbors did you have where you lived before?"*

"Oh, they were the very best! They were so kind and considerate that it almost broke our hearts to have to move away."

"Well, you will find exactly the same kind again," Farmer Jones replied.

When believers are unhappy and begin to murmur... the first place to look for the problem... really needs to be - in their own hearts. ... Christians who were unhappy at their last church... or town... or job... are probably unhappy where they are now. ... If they feel they have just cause for criticism... by all means they should express it - to the right people in an

appropriate way. ... But they must avoid murmuring or gossiping and must be willing to be part of the solution.

If the widows are being neglected... we should be willing to wait on tables. If AWANA... KIDS Church... or the Nursery is not up to par... we should be ready to assist however we can. ... If we see a need for a small group... perhaps we should host one. ... If we see the need for more evangelism... we should be willing to share Christ.

We must not just complain but must be willing to lead... to delegate... and... above all... to serve.

