

Philippians 2:12-16 (ESV)

¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,

¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing,

¹⁵ 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,

¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

We are doing something a little unusual today. We are taking a side road to study a topic that came up a while back. Honestly I wanted to study it more because I think it is something I am guilty of. Complaining.

So let's start with this question.

What is a complaint?

If I were steal \$100 from your wallet, you would have a **complaint**. You have a right to receive that \$100 back from me. And if you approach me and voice that you **want that money back** and I **will not** give it to you, you can go to the civil court and **register** that complaint. You will be the **plaintiff** in the case. You are **bringing** the complaint.

Your complaint is based on your belief that you have a **right to receive that thing** from me and **I am withholding it**.

That is the essence of complaining. I believe this concept is at the heart of all complaining.

We believe we have a right, and we believe it is being wrongfully withheld.

Now, is bringing a complaint always a bad thing? No.

In Acts 6 we see a proper complaint.

Acts 6:1-3 (NKJV)

¹ Now in those days, when *the number of* the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

² Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

Here we see a **complaint** by the Hellenists. They believed that **their widows** should receive the same treatment as the **Hebrew** widows. This was a **legitimate** right and it **was** being wrongfully withheld.

The Apostles didn't rebuke the Hellenists as a bunch of whiners and complainers. I doubt they were pleased to hear the complaint. Even legitimate complaints are like that. They usually mean something is wrong and something needs to change. We need to do some work. We need to deal with things we do not prefer to deal with. Who really wants to hear that. But it was **important** that the Apostles **hear this complaint** so they can right a wrong.

There is such a thing as a legitimate complaint. A legitimate complaint is a complaint where you are truly being wronged as defined by some form of law. If I stole your \$100, you have a legitimate complaint.

Colossians 3:13 (NKJV) lets us know that these complaints will happen inside the church as well.

¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*.

When someone sins against us and we bring the complaint to them, if they will confess we must forgive. Our complaint may be legitimate. And repentance on their part may be called for. Does this make us a **complainer** in a bad sense. Clearly not.

So what is it that is wrong kind of complaining? What is it that is sinful complaining?

The law of God tells us what is right and wrong among people. The New Testament adds to that and clarifies some things even further. So we can base our evaluations of life events on **God's word**. We can discern what is right and wrong. God's word tells us if we have a complaint and it tells us what to do about it.

If we **feel** wronged but scripture does not **say** we were wronged, then we do not have a **legitimate** complaint. And we should deal with that by thinking differently about it. That is sometimes very difficult to do. Because our feelings can be so strong that we think they **MUST** have legitimacy. We think that we **would not feel** so strongly if we had **not really** been wronged. And in that case we have to remember that our feelings are not adequate indicators of truth. They can be

deceptive. So simply feeling wronged does not make our complaint legitimate. And we are forced to business with our own thoughts and attitudes.

But there are times when our complaints **are** legitimate. When we have been truly wronged, as defined by scripture, we can request that the person who wronged us **make it right** to the degree that they can do so. That is all well and good. That is living inside the church the way we are supposed to.

But what happens when the other party **will not** make it right?

Well in the church we have some recourse. We have a path to follow to receive the proper result. But sometimes that fails and a person is cast from the fellowship. That is a difficult thing, but it happens.

But what happens when we are treated wrongly and we **cannot** get recourse?

What happens when there is no way to have something made right?

Up until now we have been talking about treatment by other people. What about life situations? What about when our life situations seem unfair? What do we do then?

Well, I think the base question, when we reduce things as far as we can, is this?

What do I have the right to expect from God?

Do I have the right from God to expect to be treated well **by my parents?**

Do I have the right from God to expect to be treated well **by my spouse?**

Do I have the right from God to expect to be treated well **by my kids?**

Do I have the right from God to expect to be treated well **by my fellow church members or the world?**

Do I have the right from God to expect to be treated well by my **government?**

Do I have the right from God to expect **good health, or wealth, or respect, or peace, or justice?**

We could go on and on.

Do you see the problem?

At the core of our wrong complaining is a failure to determine accurate expectations of God and/or a lack of trust in God.

If the essence of complaining is the belief that we have a right, and we believe that right is being wrongfully withheld, the core problem is that we have wrong expectations of God or we regard God's love for us improperly.

We have wrongly defined what it is we have a right to.

And/or we have failed to regard God's love for us adequately.

David had complaints in Psalms. Let's look at a couple of them.

David prays this in Psalm 55

Psalm 55:1-3 (NKJV)

¹ Give ear to my prayer, O God, And do not hide Yourself from my supplication.

² Attend to me, and hear me; I am restless in my complaint, and moan noisily,

³ Because of the voice of the enemy, Because of the oppression of the wicked;
For they bring down trouble upon me, And in wrath they hate me.

Here David registers his complaint to God. It is a legitimate complaint against people. He has a valid point. They are treating David wrongly.

Then David lays out his heart. He talks about his feelings and his compulsion to run from the difficulty.

He lays out that **his complaint** is against someone who used to be David's friend.

Psalm 55:16-19 (NKJV)

¹⁶ As for me, I will call upon God, And the LORD shall save me.

¹⁷ Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, And He shall hear my voice.

¹⁸ He has redeemed my soul in peace from the battle *that was* against me, For there were many against me.

¹⁹ God will hear, and afflict them, Even He who abides from of old. Selah
Because they do not change, Therefore they do not fear God.

In typical fashion, we are reading David's self talk. We are intruding into His honest communion with God. And if we are to honestly speak to God, we will register with God that **we do not always understand what He is doing**. We may lay out that **we wish He would do something differently**. God does not get upset with David for what David asks.

Now David has reason to believe that God **will do** what He asks. David had some promises of God to go by. David knew that God would use David as the King to build up Israel. So David had a **legitimate complaint** and had **promises** that allowed Him to pray according to those promises. He had a right to believe that God would do what David asked.

But look at David's **trust** in God. He says, the Lord **shall save me**. God **will hear me**. He has **already** redeemed my soul in peace.

David's complaint is in no way voicing a **wrong** expectation of David's rights before God. And David is not displaying a **distrust** in God. He is not whining about God's lack of interest in relieving David's discomfort.

David says this next thing about his God, even in the middle of his painful circumstance.

Psalm 55:22 (NKJV)

²² **Cast your burden on the LORD, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.**

He ends with- **But I will trust in You.**

There are two other Psalms with the word complaint in them and they are all alike.

We can complain to God all day long like this and we will not go wrong. Quote God's promises to God and ask Him to right the wrong. **Ask** Him to do what He **promises** to do. And do it, the whole while, trusting that God **loves you** and will give you exactly what you need.

David had a redeeming quality in his prayers. He trusted in God's character.

So David gave us good examples of complaining.

Now let's look at Job.

The book of Job uses the word complaint 5 times. Job is registering his complaint to God.

Job 23:2-4 (NKJV)

² **"Even today my complaint is bitter; My hand is listless because of my groaning.**

³ **Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, *That* I might come to His seat!**

⁴ **I would present *my* case before Him, And fill my mouth with arguments.**

It does not take long to see that Job is registering his complaint in **a bad way**.

His complaint is, that since **Job is righteous**, he deserved something better from God, He had a right to something better than the treatment he was receiving. His complaint was that God was not **responding justly** to Job. God was withholding what Job thought he deserved. Job started by saying that, "though God slay me, yet will I trust Him." But it appears Job had moved beyond that initial trust.

Had Job only voiced a complaint **against his friends**, he would have had a **legitimate** complaint. His complaint **should have been** that his friends were evaluating Job's predicament unfairly. He should have said that their evaluation of him was **wrong** because their view of **God's dealing with people in this life** is inaccurate. His friends held that **all suffering** was a **direct result** of sin a person had committed. Job's complaint that they were evaluating him wrongly would have been a **legitimate** complaint. Job could have argued that his **exceptional suffering** was not a result of **exceptional sin**. There were people who had sinned far greater than Job and had suffered significantly less than Job. If he had kept his complaint in **that realm**, he may not have received such a rebuke in the end.

But Job allowed His complaint to be placed against God. This happened because he did not understand what he had a right to expect from God. Plus he had lost his grip on his absolute trust in God's goodness.

So Job's was a bad example of a complaint.

Remember a complaint is based on the wrongful withholding of something we believe we have a right to.

Now, this is important. What do we have the right to expect from God?

When I was first answering this question I wanted to say- nothing.

And when I thought about it a little more I thought, no, I **do** have a right. I have done the labor of sin and I **deserve** my wages. I have a right to my wages. My wages are death. So I have a right to expect that God will punish me in my sin if I do not repent.

Do I have no other rights with God?

Well I certainly have none that I have worked for or earned. But praise God we **do** have things we have the **right to expect** as believers. We have the right to believe that God will fulfill every promise He makes to us.

We have the right to expect that God will do everything He promises in His time.

We have the right to expect that what **God tells us about Himself** is true.

Christ gives us the right to become children of God. We have lots things that we are right to expect from God.

These are wonderful rights. It is so good to know we can depend upon God to be true to Himself.

Now let's look at the **poster children** for complaints.

The Israelites in the wilderness.

In Exodus 15 1 the children of Israel sang a song of worship to the Lord for their deliverance from Egypt. Think about this event. It became well known over all the region. It was a **passed on story** from generation to generation of all those in surrounding lands. It was a tremendous display of the power of the God of Israel. And these people had experienced it.

Now how much impact did it have on the common person?

Exodus 15:22-24 (NKJV)

²² **So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.**

²³ **Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah,**

for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah.

²⁴ And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

OK, so you have a God that can divide the waters of the Red Sea so they could pass through it. Obviously this God has incredible powers. Now 3 days after going through the Red Sea they have encountered an obstacle. The first problem was due to a water source they **had** but didn't **want**. This time it is due to water source they **want** but don't **have**. Now logically, if God can part a sea and turn it into a road, is it not highly likely he can drum up some water for His people? Now the problem here is not so much that the people noticed that they had a problem. That happens. We encounter problems that need solutions. We have needs that need met. The problem is in the difference between the word "**request**" and the word "**complain**". Why not simply request a solution to the problem? Why does it not say, "and the people approached Moses and asked him if God would supply us with a drinkable water source?" Why do they need to accuse God of **wrongfully** withholding this water from them? Why did that not happen? It would have been completely different if they had. But just so we are not being unfair with the Israelites look at the next passage.

Exodus 16:2-3 (NKJV)

² Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

³ And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat *and* when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Nope. We are getting this right. We read it right. These people are **complainers**. And they are very dramatic at that. Why not ask Moses, Hey Moses, could you please ask our loving God for adequate food? We know He is powerful. We know He loves us. Look at what He has done for us already. So can you please ask Him for this?

Nope. They complained. They complained as a people who thought they had a right to something and God was withholding it from them.

Look at the arrogant pride. Look at the failure to give thanks. Look at all they were given. But they would not worship God. They would not trust God. When anything bad happened, when anything that in the least way threatened their lives, they resorted to their disbelief. They resorted to their mistrust in God. They complained. Let's move to the next text.

Exodus 17:1-3 (NKJV)

¹ Then all the congregation of the children of Israel set out on their journey from the Wilderness of Sin, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped in Rephidim; but *there was* no water for the people to drink.

² Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, "Give us water, that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the LORD?"

³ And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, "Why *is* it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

Do these people not have a **God**? Do they not have **any understanding** of life? Look how they blame everything on Moses, like it was his idea for their redemption and their rescue from Egypt.

Their complaints are getting even more blatant. Give us water for us to drink because we have a right to it. They still have no trust that Moses would willingly go to God in their behalf. They have no trust that God would supply this need if they would just politely ask.

Why could they not just ask? Why is that so hard to do? Surely **we** would do better.

Well let's look at our own lives. How do we treat those in authority over us?

When we experience hardship under their authority, how do we respond?

Think about this in regard to how you respond under church leadership.

How you respond under your employer?

How you respond to your husband?

How you respond to your parents?

So think about your authority.

When a decision they make causes you discomfort? When it creates more work?

When it seems unfair? When it causes you fear? When it is not what you would have done? Think about this.

What do **you** do? How do **you** respond? If you don't know the answer, maybe you should ask them. **How do I respond when I don't like the bad consequences of your leadership?**

Do we approach them and tell them our perspective and ask if they would graciously make changes that would help us? Do we calmly ask them why they are doing what they are doing so we can understand? Do we accept their path for our lives as that which they think is in our best interest?

Or do we blow up? Do we make demands. Do we play the “if you loved me you would do this” game? Do we assume the worst? Do we sulk? Do we make them pay? Do we complain about them to their face, behind their backs, or secretly in our heads?

Why do we do that? Why not do the right thing? Why not approach them in trust respectfully letting our requests be made known to them? Why is that so hard sometimes?

Is it not because of at least two things?

First to truly be submissive to authority requires **humility**. We must admit that I do not have the power in this relationship. I am in **subjection** to this person. And they have legitimate power over my life. To make a true humble request I must admit that **I am the asker** and **they are the provider**. And that is the position that God has placed me in. I am not in control here. I do not have legitimate power here. I may or may not have a right here. But whatever the case, God has placed this person in a position as my authority.

And **second**, in order to calmly make a request we must **trust** that the person we are appealing to wants our best interest. And isn't that sometimes the crux of the problem. We might not believe they love us. Who knows. Maybe we don't believe **anyone** loves us. That will ensure that we will **whine and complain**.

Arrogance and **mistrust** seem like the source of illegitimate complaints.

We really do not like saying that I am completely at the mercy of this person and that I truly trust that the **spot** God has placed me in is a **good spot**.

Now when we are under submission to a human, we are submitted to weakness. They will not be perfect. Sometimes they will be evil. So maybe we need to be guarded. But I just use these examples to display why we complain to God. And that is ultimately the source of all illegitimate complaints.

The Israelites did not want to **humbly let their requests be known** in a trusting fashion. So they complained.

And sometimes we do not want to humbly let **our** requests be known. So we complain.

Look at the alternative provided to us by our God.

Philippians 4:6-7 (NKJV)

⁶ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

⁷ and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

James 4:1-3 (NKJV)

¹ **Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires for* pleasure that war in your members?**

² **You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.**

³ **You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.**

Luke 11:9-13 (NKJV)

⁹ **"So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.**

¹⁰ **For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.**

¹¹ **If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if *he asks* for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?**

¹² **Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?**

¹³ **If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"**

Here it is. Here is the remedy for complaining. First ask if this thing you want is something that **God has promised you**, or is it **just** something you **really want**? Either way, take it to God. If it has been promised, claim it by faith and bring it to God's attention that you are faithfully expecting this thing from Him because He has promised it. That is the kind of prayer where the prayer is asking and the answer is receiving. This glorifies God to pray that prayer of faith.

If it has **not been promised**, make your prayer and supplication known to God. Come with the attitude that you are the needy party. You have no rights to ask what you are asking for. But you know that God is a loving God and wants what is best for you. We can admit that we do not have the wisdom to discern what is best for us, so we can't tell God how He should do His business. There are no games. No theatrics. No telling God what He would do if He really loves us. But we communicate to God that **we trust Him** to do what is right and if granting this request would be **good for us** we would really appreciate if He would do so. Look at what Psalms tells us about God's love, even for the complainers.

Psalm 78:38-42 (NKJV)

³⁸ **But He, *being* full of compassion, forgave *their* iniquity, And did not destroy**

them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, And did not stir up all His wrath;

³⁹ For He remembered that they *were but* flesh, A breath that passes away and does not come again.

⁴⁰ How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, *And* grieved Him in the desert!

⁴¹ Yes, again and again they tempted God, And limited the Holy One of Israel.

⁴² They did not remember His power: The day when He redeemed them from the enemy,

Do we really want to limit the Holy One of Israel? Do we want to be known as the ones who do not remember the power of God?

Do we think it is attractive when our **kids** complain? That is how we look to God when **we complain**. We do not **have to**. **Trust** is the remedy to complaining against God. And ultimately when we cling to illegitimate complaints we are complaining **about God**. Do we really want to do that? I don't think so. We have the remedy here this morning. And it is trust in the character of God. God is never withholding from us that which is in **our best interest**. That is what His Word says. Do we think we know better? Do we think we really have a complaint?

It requires a great deal of trust to truly believe God has our best interest in mind to to the point where we will **greet our circumstances with thanksgiving** to a God who **loves us and knows what we need**.

So are **you** guilty of complaining? Are you clinging to something you think you have a **right** to with God and He is **wrongly** withholding it from you? Do you refuse to be content and peaceful and joyful in your situation? Are you telling God what **He has to do** rather than **trusting Him** to do what is best? Are you angry when God does not perform like you want Him to do?

That is a complaining spirit. And it will only increase your suffering. It will keep you from **enjoying God** and **enjoying the wonderful things** He has given you. We can be free of that this morning. God offers us to walk in His presence in an open and honest way. We are offered deep fellowship with Christ. But we must humble ourselves and admit that **only He** is qualified to decide how our circumstances should be arranged. We are not. What freedom there is when we relinquish our rights and drop our complaints.

We are free to experience that freedom this week.