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# All Things without Complaining

## Philippians 2:12-28

*Russ Kennedy*

There are some fundamental responsibilities in earlier in this chapter which form the background for our thinking about complaining.

Do you agree that there really is encouragement, comfort, fellowship, affection and sympathy as a result of being in Christ?

Will you begin to humble yourself? Stop looking in the mirror of your self-exaggerated esteem. Humble yourself in the Lord's sight and in your own sight.

Do you esteem others? Lift up others in your own mind. Put others up above you in your honor and your estimation. Change the point of comparison, the perspective from which you see others and the place in which you position others.

Will you put others interest first? Move towards others with their best interests in heart and mind. What does your friend, your spouse, your children really need? Do you seek to meet those needs or are you simply taking the easy way out?

To do this with joy, you must begin to think and act like Christ. We must have His attitude, His words and wants in our heart.

I AM A SERVANT. I will give up my rights and recognition to serve others and put them first. I will humble myself for the sake of others.

I AM A SACRIFICE. I will put to death my self-life, the old person I used to be so that putting others first will be a pleasure, not a pain. I will be willing, if necessary, to not only lay down my life, but give up my time, interests, wants, pursuits, money, whatever for the sake of looking after others interests first.

I aim to magnify the worth supremacy of God by putting others first.

But this is very difficult. We struggle mightily to overcome hearts that shudder at not being put first. How will we do this? Where is the motivation and power to shift the constant gaze of my heart's attention from me to others?

It is here in this text where Paul teaches us the greatness of God's power for us and the pattern in two people's lives. Here is the powerful enablement and practical example of the aim of putting others first that keeps us from complaining and from conflict in our relationships.

## God's Power enabling our Obedience

(v.12-13)

So how are we going to make this happen in our relationships? How are we going to respond to Paul's appeal to putting others first?

<sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

### With our Determined Effort

(v.12)

Now let's think for a moment about a *contrast*, about what Paul is not saying. ❶ He is not saying that you have to finish working for your salvation. The Bible is abundantly clear that Jesus' finished the work of salvation Himself. ❷ He is not saying that you have to work in order to keep your salvation. There is no cause to effect of my work yielding a retained salvation.

What is being *commanded*? Notice first that it is *obedience*. What is being commanded here is the work of obeying God. It is what they have commendably done in the past and what they are being commanded to do in the future. Further, it is a working out of their salvation. Now we can understand this. We know what it means to "work something out". To do that means that we need a genuine and growing knowledge of what our salvation is and what its implications are for my life. What is being commanded here is a path of obedience that is marked out along the lines implied by salvation and followed by grace.

There is a wonderful *commendation* for they have obeyed without immediate supervision. They have not needed the presence of Paul to walk with God and serve God and live in godly relationships together. What was begun when he was there was carried on in his absence. We need to consider this word in our own lives as well. How often do we begin well when an elder or a counselor or a friend or a mentor teaches and trains us and then we falter and fail as we are more and more on our own?

D.A. Carson has helpfully written on this text saying, "God's continuous, gracious, sovereign work in our lives becomes an incentive to press on with fear and trembling." (*Basics for Believers*, Baker Books: 1996, p.62.) This text is not designed to foster passivity, nor is it calling for self-assured confidence. Rather, the humble Christian chooses to obey God by faith, dying to self and esteeming others controlled by the attitudes of the cross. You move forward step by step in faith. You read His Word, you believe His commands and you choose to obey because you know that the enabling grace to obey is present at that moment.

### By God's Divine Enablement

(v.13)

Why do I work out my salvation? What is the *cause* of my working out my salvation? God's work in you is to change your will and enable your strength. This is how faith enters the picture. I serve and sacrifice for others because I know by faith that God is working this choosing and doing in me. I do not passively sit

by and wait on God – I obey knowing that God has made the choosing and doing of that obedience possible. <sup>i</sup>

Finally, Paul has encouraged them to put each other first for the pursuit of his own joy. Now, God is working in us our outworking of obedience *for His own pleasure*. Therefore, God is so committed to His pleasure (that's almost shocking, isn't it) that He works in you so that you will obey Him in putting others first. This hard obedience requires His grace and reflects His glory.

### **God's Purposes keeping us from Grumbling (v.14-18)**

It is important that we see the living shape, the practical outworking of these kinds of relationships. It will have a huge impact on some of the simplest things and some of the hardest things.

<sup>14</sup> Do all things without grumbling or questioning, <sup>15</sup> 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, <sup>16</sup> holding [fast to] forth 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. <sup>17</sup> Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. <sup>18</sup> Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

### **To Serve Others without Complaint**

**(v.14-16a)**

Listen to how it starts. "Do all things without grumbling or disputing."

I am not sure that we take this command seriously. Nothing that we do is to be accompanied by complaining and arguing. This command does not come out of thin air. It is responding to what was going on the church. It has the whole history of Israel as a complaining and grumbling people behind it. In its historical setting, in its Biblical context, in its theological thrust, this command is particularly applied to *people*. In all that we do, we must not complain to or about people.

I understand that you want a small gap here. You want to be able to "have a concern", "share a problem" ... all the ways we have of masking our complaining. I appeal to you for just a moment: set aside trying to make space and make excuses for complaining that you take this heart. In my own life, it has been an important step to *assume* that I am complaining rather than *assume* that what I am doing is not complaining.

What have we learned so far about complaining?

Complaining is a dissatisfaction with God's providences that leads us to express our disfavor in a prideful and un-submissive way.

Complaining comes from expectations, wants, desires that are expressed as demands requiring change. This may be about our situations or about people in our lives.

Complaining is often about our perceived hardships, differences with leadership, dissatisfactions with other people sometimes amplified by a critical spirit.

Complaining is about things in the realm of wisdom choices. It believes that our way is best and will refuse to accept when our way is not accepted or approved.

Complaining about people that is not resolved often leads to broken relationships.

Complaining about situations often leads to *escape* decisions rather than *accept* decisions.

Complaining always invokes the chastening of God.

Do you do everything without murmuring, complaining, or grumbling? The word here could be *muttering*. Murmuring words from our mouth come from unrest in our hearts.

Further, do we do all things without disputing, arguing or dissension? That is what the second word indicates. Paul is connecting these two ideas. This is what was going on in the church. This is often what goes on with people. Two ladies in the church were complaining to such a degree that it led to conflict. (See Philippians 4). Whatever their complaint was, it had led to arguing, disputing, and dissension in the church. It was threatening to cause division. It so concerned the leadership that they send Epaphroditus to Rome to visit Paul in prison.

Brothers and sisters, please give attention to this. When your serving others is accompanied by complaining and arguing (even if it is only in the heart or mind) then you do *not* have the attitude of Jesus nor are you truly responding to Paul's appeal. Now this is a hard thing. You are enormously prone to spiritual muttering under our breath. You allow it in the daily interaction with your children. You gripe and complain about your spouses and our situations. This ought not to be.

When you complain and argue with your spouse, it is often because you are putting yourself first. When you complain about your church, and leadership and ministry, it is often because you want something different and are unhappy, dissatisfied with the ministry.

Why is complaining such a problem? Because it is the outflow of not humbly esteeming others and looking after their interests. Gratitude towards God and grace towards others severs the power to complain.

But the solution here is not merely the curbing of our tongues so that we stop murmuring and disputing verbally. What is required is a change of heart that accepts and embraces actions of self-denial and self-sacrifice gladly. Murmuring and complaining are monster enemies of our joy. It is not possible in a situation, to have joy and complaining arising from the same heart. And therefore, many

struggle with joy (among other problems as well.) When situations arise that ought to call forth from us a humble dying to self for the sake of others, we may do what is required, but we do it complaining and disputing (even under our breath) rather than with joy.

What is the aim of living like this? It is to be "Blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish..." Now listen to those words... Blameless, innocent, God's unblemished children... What an aim, a goal for us. But if you complain and argue what is the result? You are in the wrong, not blameless. You are guilty, not innocent. You are marred, not unblemished. You are in need of heart repentance to receive the grace of forgiveness.

One more point. In your complaint, you may even be correct in what you think, in your evaluation, your observation, your concern. You should bring it to the Lord first. Then bring it to whomever can address it. But, because it is a matter of wisdom, not sin, then if your concern is not satisfied, what you do next will expose whether your concern is actually sinful complaining. Will you insist on your way, your wisdom, your counsel? Or will you entrust it to the Lord and accept that situation or that person as the good providence of God for you? Will you escape, run, divorce, move, change churches? Or will you recognize that you are being called to self-denial, self-sacrifice, to humbly putting others first?

What is the effect when I sacrifice and serve and live for others even when it is painful to do so? What will flow from it that make is worthwhile? Well, because it is so different from the world's way, it is a magnificent testimony to others. We want others to know that we are Christians – that we think and love and live differently. In the darkness and crookedness of our world the uncomplaining, joyful humility that serves and sacrifices will be a beacon of bright light pointing to the cross.

Once again, I have to ask you to pay careful attention. Look at the core sentence again. Do all things [in this way] [expecting this aim] holding fast [forth] the Word of life..." Now we have to ask, is it *forth* or *fast*? Are we as we do this *offering the Word of Life* (forth) or *clinging to the Word of Life* (fast). Most commentators, due to the context take the *forth* sense. Do all things this way expecting this aim which is itself a holding forth or offering the Word like one offers a glass of milk or a cup of wine. The evangelistic sense best suits the context.

Do you want to hold out the Word of life to others? Do you want to shine in the darkness of our day? Do you want to show the purity and authenticity of Christianity? Then put others first. Serve and sacrifice for one another. Consciously choose to value others and promote their interests. Do so joyfully because of Christ and the cross. Do so because you know that step-by-step, deed-by-deed God is working in you to make it so.

## **To Sacrifice for Others with Joy**

**(v.16b-18)**

The second affect is on those to whom we are responsible spiritually. Together, we are to joyfully sacrifice for others. We see that their living in humble harmony will encourage Paul and give him hope that his ministry to and among them was not futile. So their sacrificial obedience gives him cause to glory, not in himself nor in his ministry but rather in the grace of God. And what an encouragement it is when God's men see the fruit of their labors in the holiness and joyfulness of their students or flock.

Paul's own sharing of this joy becomes the model for their knowing how this joy works. What an awesome responsibility. For all of us who serve as elders are we modeling this kind of uncomplaining, humble sacrifice and serving to our flock so that they know how to do this for one another? Is it a joy to you to do the hard things of ministry? Has there crept into the work of being a shepherd a sort of complaining, griping self-focus that is not embracing Christ's attitude and does not promote the interests of others?

And just so that they don't miss it, his service to them and their sacrifice for him are mutually shared overflows of joy. May our ministry together here as a church will taste and feel and look like this.

## **God's People modeling Humble Sacrifice (v.19-30)**

Well, we need some flesh on this, Paul says. We need to see this in the lives of real people lest we think that living this way is simply not possible. And this is what he does. In the context of the church's relationships in ministry, he affirms the sacrificial serving of two men, Timothy and Epaphroditus.

### **Timothy – Serving as a Son**

**(v.19-24)**

Timothy is an example of *oneness of mind with Paul* illustrating the *I am a servant* attitude.

<sup>19</sup> I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. <sup>20</sup> For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. <sup>21</sup> For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. <sup>23</sup> I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, <sup>24</sup> and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

### **With the Unity of a Kindred Spirit (v.19-21)**

Their special oneness was an example of the general oneness for all. When he sent them Timothy, they would soon be able to see what he was talking about. Only Timothy had a genuine concern for their welfare. His was a kindred spirit with Paul. They could learn from Timothy the practical lessons of what it meant to really care from someone else. And we find all too often what Paul and Timothy did as well, that too many people around Paul were looking out for number one.

### **In the Submission of a Godly Son**

**(v.22-24)**

Timothy had proven himself over and over again. He was an example of humble obedience. Paul could hold him up as one who would stand shoulder to shoulder as a son would to his father. Since he had shown his proven worth, Timothy could represent Paul to them.

What a lesson this is for putting others first. This wonderful side-by-side serving of father and son in the faith exemplifies that which we ought to have in our relationships.

Finally, as he often does, Paul writes, "I intend to come and see you." The message is clear. He will be coming and checking them out. There is an accountability in their following the model of those who serve as sons with godly mentors and fathers.

### **Epaphroditus – Sharing as a Servant**

**(v.25-30)**

Epaphroditus is an example of *oneness of mind with the church* illustrating the *I am a sacrifice* attitude.

<sup>5</sup> I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, <sup>26</sup> for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. <sup>27</sup> Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup> I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. <sup>29</sup> So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, <sup>30</sup> for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

### **With the Unity of a Shared Service**

**(v.25-26)**

Paul sees a sharing in ministry as fellowship and brotherhood as soldiers and workers. Epaphroditus had come as the church's messenger and to minister to Paul. He wanted to do for Paul what the church had not yet been able to do. He wanted to communicate encouragement and care for Paul personally and practically. So Paul says, "I value him as a fellow servant; You entrusted with your care for me."

Here though is the kind of man he was. Even when there is the opportunity to minister to Paul, he is still deeply concerned about the church at Philippi. So concerned that it distressed him that the church had heard about his sickness. What an example of selfless service. Here he is, ministering for the church in serving Paul and now he has fallen sick. His reaction is not to dwell on the circumstances, but to be concerned about the church back home.

Brothers and sisters, are we like this? Is our serving in ministry for Christ like this? Or does difficulty and distress in ministry cause us to turn inward and

begin to complain? Do we find an ever-growing self-pity choking out the joy of our sacrifice?

**In the Sacrifice of a Life-Risking Mission (v.27-30)**

Epaphroditus has proven himself. He is an example of willingness to die. In fact, he was so sick he almost died. Paul sees his life being saved as aimed at sorrow being spared. The grace to Epaphroditus kept grief from Paul.

We must learn to honor those who serve and sacrifice like this in the family at home and at church.

Why should we honor spouses and parents and children and sheep like this? Because he risked his life to communicate their concern for Paul. His Christ-like attitude held firm even in the face of possible death.

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## Reflect and Respond

What about your putting others first?

Are you putting forth every bit of energy to put others first while totally relying on the grace and power of God?

Is your putting others first filled with joyful, sacrificial self-denial?

Do you seek to sacrifice and serve for the sake of those over you, whether your husband, you parents, your employer, your leaders at church?

May God help us to turn these two wonderful phrases- I am a servant and I am a sacrifice - into real, uncomplaining, Christ-honoring, gospel bearing relationships.

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<sup>i</sup> This is such an important concept for us. I work because God is at work in me. "We strive and labor because we have fixed our hope on God" (1 Timothy 4:10). "And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*" (1 Corinthians 12:4). "And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20). "And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me" (Colossians 1:29).