

Complaint-Free Living

Hi. My name is Brian, and I'm a complaint-addict. No kidding. I complain like an alcoholic drinks. I am hopelessly powerless against complaining, and by complaining have made a mess of my world.

Are you a complainer? Most people don't think of themselves that way. In fact, the people I think complain the most see themselves as relatively positive people. And the truth is it is easier to pick out complainers in others than to see yourself as a complainer.

In Philippians 2:14 St. Paul has these words: Do all things without complaining or arguing." I used to think this was just a way for Paul to try to keep peace in the early church. I was wrong. This statement has huge theological ramifications. Paul says, "Do not complain or argue *so that* you may be blameless and innocent children of God." Isn't that interesting? Paul connects your being a child of God with your ability not to complain or argue. This is no throw-away statement; your status as a child of God is somehow connected with your not complaining.

Why is that? Is it because God wants everyone to get along? I don't think so. Is it because God doesn't like his children bickering and fighting? I don't think so. It's bigger than that.

Let me ask you: do you remember anywhere else in the Bible where God has to deal with complaining people? The Israelites, right? I mean God frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and they aren't out of sight from Pharaoh three days and they start complaining. In Exodus chapters 15-17 the word "complain" is recorded 9 times. And this did not set well with God.

To God complaining is an act of faithlessness. When the Israelites complained they were in essence saying, "God, we don't trust you; you may have helped us in the past, but we don't have faith that you can do it again."

Did you ever think of complaining as an act of faithlessness? That seems to be the precise point that Paul is driving at in his letter to the Philippians. He seems to be saying, "Folks, if you are the children of God, then have a little faith that God can take care of you. You're giving God a bad name when you whine so much."

Maybe these are words that could be said to us today. Not just us, but the whole Christian Church. I mean, sometimes Christians are the biggest complainers I know. I have been in clergy circles where they do nothing but complain. I have been in Church meetings where all people do is complain. I have been in Christian support groups and Bible studies that seem to complain about everything and everyone. And sometimes I'm right at home with them all.

The trouble with being Lutheran is that it appears that the whole Reformation started out as Martin Luther complaining about the abuses of the Church. Ever since, my experience is, Lutherans have perfected the art of complaining.

So today I am going to invite you to do something that might change the way you live, the way you think, the way you speak, and the way you complain. Inspired by a church that did this back in St. Louis, Missouri, Christ Lutheran Church in Visalia is undertaking a challenge to go 21 days without complaining. Why 21 days? Because behavioral therapists will tell you that if you repeat an action for 21 days, it becomes a habit. So if you can not complain for 21 days chances are it will cut down significantly on the way you complain for the rest of your life.

Here's how the challenge works. You are receiving a purple rubber bracelet. The idea is to put it on your wrist. Every time you complain you are to move it from one wrist to the other. In the course of a day you might move that bracelet 9 or 10 times. That's OK; keep moving it, and when you do, you start fresh.

The challenge is to go complaint free for 21 days. That means if you go 20 days without complaining, but on the 21st day you complain, then you move the bracelet to the other wrist and start over fresh the next day. People who have done this will tell you it takes about 7 months to go 21 straight days without complaining. So far I have had my bracelet on for 2 weeks, but today really is day number two; this week I golfed three times and it is not easy not to complain on the golf course.

Here are the deeper rules:

- * First, the complaint has to be said out loud. If you think a complaint, you get a pass. If you pray a complaint, you get a pass. But if you speak the complaint, you move the bracelet.
- * Second, this is about you and not about others. You cannot be "complaint-police." If you hear someone else complain and you point it out to them, in essence you are complaining and thus need to move your own bracelet.
- * Third, since complainers feed off of one another you may need to take a break from hanging around certain people.
- * Fourth, a complaint is different than a call to action. Complainers usually want others to change. A call to action suggests that you will change, and then change the situation.

Let me give you an example. I noted Martin Luther earlier. Martin Luther was not complaining when he nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. He saw an abuse and was calling himself and the whole church to action. Likewise if someone is kicking you in head it is OK to say, "Hey, stop that; I don't like to be kicked in the head." That is a call to action, not a complaint.

I think if we were honest with ourselves this morning, most of the things that we believe are worthy of our complaining are pretty rare. I think we might come to the conclusion that there really isn't too much that we can justifiably complain about.

So what are the two most common places where complaints are made, and why are we trying to keep from going there? One place is when a situation doesn't turn out the way you want it to. Maybe the turkey burns in the oven. Maybe rains on Thanksgiving and it spoils an outdoor dinner plan. Maybe your alarm doesn't go off on Friday morning causing you to miss the bargains on Black Friday. Maybe it's the length of a worship service. I bet we could list a couple thousand every day situations in which you could and in fact have complained.

You know what we are saying, don't you? We are saying, "The world is out of control and nothing is fair. We are saying I don't deserve what's happening." We have a belief that when things happen that work against us that nothing good can happen because everything is out of control.

This past summer we were scheduled to meet my wife's family in Seattle for a 7-day cruise along the Alaska coast line. In order to get there we had to fly from Fresno to Seattle by way of Los Angeles. We arrived in Los Angeles late and were misdirected to our gate. Once we got there we were told where the correct gate was, requiring us to leave the terminal, catch a bus,

and go to another terminal, check in, and go through security. We didn't make it. Even worse there were no more flights to Seattle that day, and they couldn't guarantee we could catch a flight the next day and make it in time to board the cruise ship.

This was the perfect complaining moment. With a stressed out wife and two teenage boys we could have really lost it. To this day, I don't know why we didn't. What we did do is rent a car and drove all night long making it to the cruise ship 17 hours latter. It was one of the best family moments we have ever had and it is something we will look back on and laugh at the rest of our lives.

What God says is, "trust me." No matter what set-back you experience, no matter what disappointment comes your way, no matter what frustration hits you in the face, God is with you (that's his name after all) and God is in control. And because of that, God can take any situation and make it work for His good. Do you trust him? The wandering Israelites couldn't. I bet you can.

The other common place where complaints are lodged is when somebody does something to you and you react. Somebody cuts you off on the freeway and you complain. Someone at school talks in class but the teacher blames you, you complain. A project at work doesn't get done on time because someone dropped the ball, you complain.

In so many situations, to complain is to blame. To complain is to say that someone else is the reason for your discomfort. To complain is to be a victim, giving control over to someone or something else.

I suppose I hear more than any other complaint the complaint that someone else is responsible for someone's unhappiness. I hear husbands blame their wives for their unhappiness; I hear wives blame their husbands. I hear parents blame their kids for the way things are and I hear kids (sometimes adult kids) blame their parents.

It never works well when someone assigns to other people the reason for the way things are.

But God has made you in His image. You bear the image of God. You are not a puppet, you are not a victim of other people's whims. You are a child of God, capable of being responsible for yourself and how you react to other people. And as a child of God you can take responsibility for your feelings and your actions, and not just complain about the way things are.

I was with a group of people recently. A woman in the group spotted another woman at a distance. She said, "Every time I see her, I get so angry." Now I have no idea about their history. I don't know what the other woman did to make this lady so angry. But another woman in the group had the wisdom to say, "Gosh, it sounds like she has a lot of power over you; I would stop looking at her if I were you."

You have the power and the freedom given to you by God not to let other people be responsible for your feelings and your thoughts. And by not complaining about them you are claiming your child of God status.

There's a story as told by the monks. A certain monk wanted to join the order of a very strict teaching, the way of silence. So the abbot of the prior explained to the monk that he can only speak once every five years, and then he can only speak two words. So after the first five

years the abbot came to the monk and said, "What are your two words?" "Hard bed," said the monk. "No problem," said the abbot, "we can fix that," and got him a new bed.

In the tenth year the abbot came to the monk and said, "What are your two words?" "Food cold," said the monk. "No problem," said the abbot, "we can fix that," and served him warmer food.

In the fifteenth year the abbot came to the monk and said, "What are your two words?" "I quit," said the monk. "It's probably a good thing," said the abbot, "all you've done is complain since you've arrived."

This 21-day challenge to not complain is not about you being a nicer person to be around; though that might happen. And it isn't about you discovering the power of good thoughts rather than bad thoughts; though that may happen. The real desire is to grow our faith in a God who is in control, and to have our lives shaped by the God that our lights might shine like stars in the sky so that others might give glory to our Father in heaven.

Amen.