

## ***What's so Bad about Grumbling?***

Today we explore the question, “What’s so Bad about Grumbling?” The premise behind this question is that grumbling is bad - really bad. If you read through the book of Exodus, for example, grumbling is one of the dominant sins of the children of Israel. Repeatedly we read that the children of Israel grumbled against Moses. On numerous occasions their grumbling was a capital offense; people who grumbled lost their lives. You might read these accounts and wonder, “What’s so bad about grumbling? They were only expressing themselves; they had legitimate frustrations and fears. They were only being honest!” What’s so bad about grumbling?

When we come to the New Testament, we find grumbling categorically prohibited. In Philippians 2:14 Paul wrote:

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing;

If what we “do” is the entree, grumbling and disputing should never be a side dish. Grumbling and disputing should ***never*** accompany our actions. I think that the Bible teaches that ***it is never, ever okay to grumble under any circumstance***. You may or may not agree with that statement (yet), but I hope you do by the end of this message. Today we are going to ask the question “Why is grumbling so bad?”

To explore this question we’ll consider three things this morning. We will ***first*** consider the negative example of the children of Israel in the wilderness. God’s commentary on their grumbling reveals why grumbling is so bad. ***Second***, we’ll look at this command in Philippians 2:14 to “do all things without grumbling.” ***Third***, we’ll look at some alternatives to grumbling (there are actually many alternatives).

***The Negative Example of the Children of Israel (Exodus 15-17, Numbers 14-16, I Corinthians 10:6-10)***

The ***first example*** of grumbling is found in Exodus 15:22–25. We read that the children of Israel began to grumble only three days after God had miraculously brought them through the Red Sea on dry land, delivering them from the Egyptian army.

22 Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah. 24 So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” 25 Then he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. . .

Sometimes we grumble over insignificant things: minor irritations, preferences, annoyances, etc. But sometimes we grumble about important things, things that really matter. That was the case here. It’s a life and death issue when hundreds of thousands of people are in the wilderness without water. When they arrived at Marah, they found

water, but it was undrinkable; it was “bitter” - perhaps salty. And so they “grumbled at Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’” Grumbling is self-centered complaining (as opposed to “constructive criticism”). Grumbling is an expression of dissatisfaction without any thought for edification or unity. Grumbling often sends the message, “I’m not happy and it’s your fault.”

In response, Moses “cried out to the Lord.” Prayer was Moses’ consistent response to the people’s grumbling. God, in reply, showed Moses a tree to be thrown into the waters to make it drinkable. There probably isn’t a physical/chemical explanation for how a tree thrown into water can make it sweet; the point is that God miraculously provided drinkable water for the children of Israel.

The **second example** is found in chapter 16. This incident took place about a month after they had left Egypt, a month after they had witnessed unparalleled miracles by God. This account confirms that experiencing God’s presence and God’s blessing doesn’t make people immune to grumbling.

1 Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. 2 The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The sons of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Apparently their food supply was running short. They feared that they would literally starve in the wilderness. As we read the book of Exodus, we’re thinking, “The God who parted the Red Sea. . . the God who made the bitter water sweet. . . the God who promised to be ‘with them’ surely wouldn’t let them starve in the wilderness.” But in “real time” the children of Israel were full of fear and unbelief; their thinking/reasoning became incredibly distorted. They reasoned that slavery in Egypt was better than freedom in the wilderness. Even though they might have died in Egypt, at least they had plenty of meat and bread.

Their grumbling became especially mean-spirited when they said to Moses and Aaron, “. . . you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Blaming other people is a common component of grumbling. The people blamed Moses and Aaron. The insinuation is that they were careless and incompetent as leaders; they had brought the nation out into the wilderness without a plan for feeding them! This insinuation wasn’t lost on Moses. Let’s read verses 4 through 7:

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. 5 “On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, “At evening you will know that the

Lord has brought you out of the land of Egypt; 7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, for He hears your grumblings against the Lord; and what are we, that you grumble against us?”

Moses pointed out that they were really grumbling “against the Lord.” He was the One who had brought them into the wilderness. He was the One who had the power to provide bread and meat. Moses said, “What are we, that you grumble against us?” He was saying, “We aren’t sovereign; we aren’t all-powerful.” Moses reiterates in verses 8 and 9 that they were actually grumbling against the Lord.

8 Moses said, “This will happen when the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the Lord hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the Lord.” 9 Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, ‘Come near before the Lord, for He has heard your grumblings.’ ”

Again in verses 11 and 12, we read:

11 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 12 “I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’ ”

In the span of six verses we are told three times that the Lord “heard” the grumblings of the sons of Israel. Jesus (in Matthew 12:34) said that “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” So when God hears our words He is listening to our hearts. Here in Exodus 16 God wanted them to know that He heard their words and saw their hearts. He saw that they didn’t trust Him. They “failed the test.”

One **final example** is found in Numbers 14. You’ll remember that Moses sent the “spies” to scout out the land of Canaan. The spies brought back the report that the Land was very fertile, but the people were strong and the cities were well-fortified (Numbers 13:25-29). Caleb, being full of faith, advocated taking the Promised Land. But the rest of the spies gave a “bad report”; they said that the land “devours people” and that the inhabitants are huge. They said, “We’re like grasshoppers in comparison to the inhabitants of the Land.”

In Numbers 14 the people take their grumbling to a whole new level:

1 Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 2 All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!

Previously they wished they’d died in Egypt (Exodus 16:3). Now they add, “Or would that we had died in this wilderness!” Notice how their grumbling continues:

3 “Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” 4 So they said to one another, “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.”

They didn't believe that God was strong enough to give them the land that He had promised them. They didn't see any significance to the deliverance they had experienced so far. “Yes, God performed ten miraculous signs in Egypt; yes, God parted the Red Sea; yes, God provided manna in the morning and quail at night; but we're convinced that if we try to take the Land that the men will be killed and the women and children will be taken as plunder.” They wanted to fire Moses and appoint another leaders who would take them back into slavery.

How do you think God felt when His people grumbled in this way? Given that their grumbling revealed what was in their hearts, we could ask how did God feel when they dismissed God's track record as irrelevant, basically viewed God as too weak to deliver what He'd promised, and decided that slavery would be preferable to trusting God? We'll see in a moment.

Read the rest of the chapter when you get the chance. Joshua and Caleb pleaded with the people to have a change of heart. When they wouldn't, God threatened to wipe them out and start over with Moses. Moses pleads with God to forgive their sin, appealing to God's lovingkindness. Eventually God relents and decides not to wipe out the people completely. But He pronounces this judgment upon them for grumbling:

26 The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 27 “How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me? I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel, which they are making against Me. 28 “Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you; 29 your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me.

God basically said, “I will grant their wish: Those who have grumbled against Me will die in the wilderness. You will stay in the wilderness a year for every day the twelve spies spent in the Land. So you will spend 40 years in the wilderness. Then I will bring your children into the Land.”

The answer that the book of Exodus gives to the question, “What's so bad about grumbling?” is that ***grumbling reflects a heart of unbelief and disrespect toward God***. When the people grumbled about their circumstances, they were grumbling against God. They were accusing God of being deficient when it comes to love and power. Grumbling is incompatible with a heart that fully trusts in God as He is revealed in Scripture.

What we've seen in Exodus suggests that when we find ourselves grumbling, we should take the time to evaluate what our grumbling says about the condition of our hearts.

Like the children of Israel, we might be so fixated on what *isn't* right that we're trivializing what *is* right; we might be so anxious about what we perceive God *hasn't* done that we minimize what God *has* done. Like the children of Israel, we might be blaming people in our families, in our workplaces, or in the church for our hardship. It may be that God hears our grumbling as "against Him" - that He doesn't really love us and that He's not powerful enough to deliver what He's promised.

I really don't presume to understand the condition of your heart here this morning. But the Scriptures and experience suggest grumbling is a window into a person's soul. Our grumbling (or the lack thereof) reveals significant things about our relationship with God and what we *really* think about Him. This is why the Scriptures put so much emphasis on the condition of our hearts. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it *flow* the springs of life." We live from the heart. Putting aside grumbling isn't merely a matter of biting our tongues; it will require a change of heart.

This is what God is ultimately after: hearts that are fully His. In 2 Chronicles 16:9 we read:

9 "For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. . .

If our hearts are "completely God's," we won't insult Him by implying that He is indifferent and weak; rather, we will trust Him - His goodness and His power.

***The Prohibition against Grumbling*** (*Philippians 2:14-16*) After telling the Philippians to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling," Paul gives this instruction:

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing; 15 so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

We don't have time to look at these verses in depth. I would simply point out that the reason Paul gives for "doing all things without grumbling or disputing" is so that we will prove to a watching world that we are children of God. We don't want to be ungrateful children who give the impression that we think our heavenly Father is unloving and weak. But that's the impression we give people when we grumble. That's the impression that the children of Israel gave. Grumbling and disputing is so common and accepted in the world that you and I will "appear as lights in the world" if we do all things without grumbling or disputing.

You and I cannot obey the command, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing," unless we are wholeheartedly devoted to God. In Psalm 19:14 David prayed, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer." That's the prayer of a person who understands that God

hears our words and knows our thoughts/meditations. That's the prayer of somebody who wants to be wholeheartedly devoted to God.

Would you like to live with, worship with, and work with people who don't grumble? Of course you would. And the people you live with, worship with, and work with would say the same thing. It is in everybody's best interest that we do all things without grumbling or disputing.

We're not saying, of course, that we become passive and enable all sorts of bad behavior or that it's wrong to try to change circumstances and people. But we are saying that ***it is never, ever okay to grumble under any circumstance***. The good news is that there are many superior alternatives to grumbling.

***Alternatives to Grumbling.*** These are habits that have the potential of changing the culture of our families, our work environments, our church life, and our friendships.

***Prayer.*** This was Moses' response to the people's grumbling; he cried out to God asking Him to meet their needs. Presumably this is what the people should have done. Instead of making all sorts of nasty accusations against Moses and Aaron, they could have gone directly to God and asked Him to act.

When you and I find ourselves disappointed or anxious or angry, we can come boldly to the throne of grace and ask God for what we need. We have many examples of this in the psalms. The largest category of psalms are "laments" in which people brought their complaints directly to God. There is a huge difference grumbling and lament. A lament is an expression of faith whereas grumbling is an expression of unbelief. A lament appeals to God's character and covenants; grumbling insults God and His character. Listen to Psalm 5, for example:

1 Give ear to my words, O Lord,  
Consider my groaning.  
2 Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God,  
For to You I pray.  
3 In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice;  
In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.

Instead of grumbling, you and I can come boldly before the throne of grace through Jesus Christ our Lord.

***Ignore the offense/issue.*** This isn't always a good option, but it ***is*** an option many times. In Proverbs 19:11 (ESV) we read:

11 Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

Before Brenda and I got married, some of the best advice we got was, "Nine out of ten things simply don't matter. It's better to be kind than to be right." It is a person's glory to

overlook an offense. If you want to be glorious/radiant, don't get bent out of shape over every annoyance and don't feel the need to correct everybody and everything.

***Speak the truth in love.*** In Ephesians 4:15 when Paul describes what maturity in the body of Christ looks like, he mentions "speaking the truth in love." As you know (1 Corinthians 13), love is patient and kind; love doesn't hold grudges. There will be times when we need to speak the truth to other people - in the church and in other contexts. When we do, if we're mature, we won't grumble like the children of Israel. We will be patient and kind. We won't merely be trying to "get things off our chest"; we won't try to devastate other people or "put them in their place." Our kindness and patience invites them to see and accept the truth.

Speaking the truth in love will require us to have hearts that are full of truth and full of love. A heart like that is cultivated very carefully over time. But this is our calling in Christ Jesus.

This week notice when you're tempted to grumble. Notice what is in your heart. And Make Psalm 19:14 your prayer:

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.