

“Do All Things Without Grumbling”
Philippians 2:14-18
June 29, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in our series in the Book of Philippians, as we come now to Philippians 2:14-18.

As we hear from our text, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

¹⁴Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵that 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, ¹⁶holding 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. ¹⁷Even 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. ¹⁸Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord,
Let your saving hand be close to us,
for we long for your salvation.
Give our souls life, that we might praise you,
and help us now through your word.
We have each gone astray like lost sheep.
As we come to your word now, we ask you to seek us.
For we have not forgotten your word to us.
Grant this, we ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:173-176]

Introduction

In our text this morning, Paul fits a lot of content into a little space.

Next week we'll focus in more on verse 17 and its implications for us. But this week, we'll consider the rest of this text.

And as we do, what we see is that: We are called here to resist grumbling in a twisted world and instead shine, by clinging to God's Word, and rejoicing in Christ's future coming.

Let me say that again: We are called to resist grumbling in a twisted world and instead shine, by clinging to God's Word, and rejoicing in Christ's future coming.

Let's break that down now, together.

We Are Called to Resist Grumbling

First, we are called to resist grumbling.

Paul says, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing."

Now, it's important to be clear about what's in view here. Paul is not focused here on grief or lament. What's in view is not mourning or sadness or depression.

What's in view here for Paul is grumbling and disputing that is rooted in discontentedness.

And that becomes especially clear when we note that in this passage, Paul seems to be alluding to the grumbling of Israel, after the Exodus, when they were traveling in the wilderness. [Fee, 242]

In the Book of Exodus, God had saved Israel from terrible and dehumanizing slavery. He had performed miraculous deeds, toppling the great superpower of the day: Egypt. He had shown his power and his care for Israel in incredible ways. And then he had promised them to bring them to a new land – a land flowing with milk and honey, that would be theirs.

And yet, in spite of all that, again and again, Israel grumbled against God, and disputed with the leaders he had given them.

There are many examples we could cite of this, but one that is striking is that after God had rescued them, after God had made them into a nation, after God had spoken to them, after God had provided them with manna – with miraculous bread from heaven to eat, and water brought forth miraculously from a rock to drink – after God had done all this for them ... in Numbers 11, the people grumbled again, over the lack of culinary variety available to them. They cried out: "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." Nothing ... but the miraculous bread from heaven.

And that's just one example. Because Israel had grumbled before this particular incident ... and they would again grumble after it. Israel, in the wilderness, was characterized by the sin of grumbling.

And grumbling is rooted in discontentedness. And that discontentedness takes different forms.

Sometimes, the form of our discontentedness is about quantity. It's wanting more – demanding excess beyond what we have, and then grumbling that we don't have it.

This is that discontentedness ... when your basic needs are provided for, when objectively speaking, you are doing well (after all, if you make the median household income for Tacoma, then you're in the top 10% of the world economically. [<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/tacomacitywashington/PST045224> and <https://wid.world/income-comparator/>]) So you may globally, objectively, be doing quite well ... but then you look at that person in the other pew ... that person you know has more money than you do, more stuff than you do ... more surplus than you do ... and you look at what they have ... and you look at what you have ... and you start to grumble ... against God ... against your boss ... against whatever forces led to this outcome. You're discontent. And you grumble. Because you want more. This is discontentedness focused on quantity.

But, we should also note there is a different kind of discontentedness that is based on quality. It's more rooted in a kind of particularity in our demands ... it may look less like covetousness ... and more like constant criticism of what is offered to us.

We see something of it in Israel's rejection of bread from heaven, and demand instead for meat.

C.S. Lewis explains this tendency in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. There he describes a woman who is always discontent, who is enslaved to her senses ... but she herself is blind to it, simply because "the quantities involved are small." But, he points out, quantities matter little so long as our demands "produce querulousness, impatience, uncharitableness, and self-concern" – in other words, grumbling, and disputing.

Lewis describes the woman like this – he says: "She is a positive terror to hostesses and servants. She is always turning from what has been offered her to say with a demure little sigh and a smile 'Oh please, please...*all* I want is a cup of tea, weak but not too weak, and the teeniest weeniest bit of really crisp toast'."

"You see?" Lewis writes, "Because what she wants is smaller and less costly than what has been set before her, she never recognises as gluttony her determination to get what she wants, however troublesome it may be to others."

"The woman," Lewis explains, "is in what may be called the 'All-I-want' state of mind. *All* she wants is a cup of tea properly made, or an egg properly boiled, or a slice of bread properly toasted. But she never finds any servant or any friend who can do these simple things 'properly' – because her 'properly' conceals an insatiable demand" for something very exact ... and very particular. And when she doesn't get exactly what she has in mind ... she grumbles. [Lewis, *Screwtape*, Letter XVII]

That tendency can, of course, terrorize a waiter or a cook, or any other service worker, as Lewis describes ... but it can also terrorize an employee ... or a spouse ... or a son ... or a daughter ... when our very particular demands lead us, more often than not ... to grumble and critique and dispute what others in our life have done ... because it hasn't met the virtually unachievable particularities we have set in our own minds.

With such a mindset, we can criticize every person above us – whether a parent, a teacher, a supervisor, an elder, or a government official – and ... we can terrorize every person below us. We can grumble and we can dispute.

This is grumbling rooted in a persistent discontentedness over quality.

And so ... our grumbling can be about wanting more. Or our grumbling can be about wanting things “just right.”

Which form of grumbling do you tend towards: a grumbling over quantities, or a grumbling over qualities?

And then, where does this grumbling often show up? What areas of life? What preferences and desires and demands?

And then ... how does that grumbling affect your relationships with others? How does it do damage to those relationships, whether by quietly fraying them, or leading to more overt disruption and conflict?

Because, remember, Pauls’ focus throughout this chapter has been on how we treat and relate to other people – and that remains true here as well.

Because grumbling is poison to relationships – whether personal or professional, whether in our family, or in our friendships, or in our workplace, or in our churches. Grumbling corrodes our relationships. It drives other people away.

And with that, grumbling also breaks down our institutions. Whether churches or schools, businesses or non-profits, civic, or government, grumbling weakens and erodes our institutions. In fact, if you want to take down an institution, often, the best way to do it is not to attack it from the outside ... but to get people grumbling on the inside. That’s how you take down a church. That’s how you break up a family. Discontentedness and grumbling are corrosive to institutional health.

But it’s not just relationships and institutions that are damaged by grumbling. Our very souls are damaged by this sin as well.

Because grumbling is a sin that will consume us bit by bit ... until it dominates us completely. That can lead to devastating results if left unchecked over a lifespan of 70 years. But, as the Bible tells us, our lifespan is not just 70 years. Whether for good or ill, we will exist forever. And so, C.S. Lewis points out, we need to consider not just what a sin like grumbling will do to the human heart if left unchecked for decades ... we need to ask what a sin like that will do to us if it’s left unchecked for millennia.

It may begin, Lewis writes, “with a grumbling mood, and you yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticising it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, [may] embrace it. [You] can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no *you* left to criticise the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine.” [Lewis, *Great Divorce*, 77-78]

Grumbling is a serious sin. It poses a serious risk to our relationships, to our institutions, and to our very souls.

And so, Paul tells us, we are called to resist grumbling.

In a Twisted World

But Paul then frames this exhortation further. He writes in verse 14 that we are to do all things without grumbling. He adds in verse 15 that we are to do this “in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.”

We are called to resist grumbling in a twisted world.

And one thing that means is that we are called to resist grumbling in the context of a twisted world.

Because here’s the thing: It’s not hard to resist grumbling in an untwisted world. As has been noted, if everyone in our lives was perfect, and if they all did exactly what we wanted them to do all the time, then of course it would be easy to not grumble. And that might seem like an obvious point to make ... but we often think this way.

Because every time we excuse our grumbling, every time we say “Well, if that person would just do X right, then I wouldn’t complain so much – then I wouldn’t grumble so much.” “If my spouse, or my child, or my boss, or my employees, or my pastor, or my friend, or whoever it may be, would just do Y better, I wouldn’t be so bitter or angry or grumbling” ... really, what we’re saying then is “Well, if I had nothing to grumble over, then I wouldn’t grumble!” “If I just lived in a perfect world, I’d be much less disagreeable!”

But God hasn’t called you to live in a perfect, unfallen world ... at least not yet. God hasn’t called you to only hold your temper in settings where no one ever frustrates you. He’s called you to “do all things without grumbling or disputing” in a twisted and crooked world – where people fall short, and fail, and act selfishly, and tick you off.

Saint Francis of Assisi said: “A servant of God cannot know how much patience and humility he has within himself as long as he is content. When the time comes, however, when those who should make him content do the opposite, he has as much patience and humility as he has at that time and no more.” [Admonitions, XIII]

When everyone who you expected to make you happy and content does all that you want them to do to make you happy and content ... and you don’t grumble ... that’s no credit to you.

But, when those who should make us content do the opposite, and they frustrate us, or disappoint us ... we have as much patience and humility as we have at that moment, and no more.

It is specifically in the context of a twisted, broken, and frustrating world that God calls us to do all things without grumbling.

And so, Paul tells us here that we are called to resist grumbling in a twisted world.

And Instead Shine

But from there, Paul continues on. Because it's not just that we are called to resist grumbling in a twisted world, but in contrast to a grumbling spirit, we are called on to shine.

Paul writes: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 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,"

Paul here tells us that there should be a contrast between us and the rest of the world. Instead of grumbling as the world does – instead of disputing as the world does, we are supposed to shine.

Now ... it's easy to turn that into a caricature of plastic people with big, fake, and vaguely creepy smiles on their faces, but that's not what Paul is getting at here.

By using the word "shine" Paul is actually alluding to a passage from the Book of Daniel, where Daniel is told that a day will come, when God will make all things new, and "those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." And on that day, those who have been faithful to the Lord will "shine like the brightness of the sky above [...] like the stars forever and ever." [Daniel 12:2-3; Fee, 242]

Paul is saying to the Christians in Philippi that they are to have something of that glory, of that beauty, of that future resurrection light to them even now, in this life.

In other words, he's calling us to live now in light of the future promises of the gospel. He's calling us to live now in light of the coming kingdom. And doing that will make our lives different. In fact, living that way will make our lives attractive and beautiful – as lights shining in a dark world.

This is what Jesus is referring to when he says to his followers: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [...] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." [Matthew 5:14, 16]

Far too often we blend in with the world's grumbling, we blend in with the world's disputing, we blend in with the world's darkness. But Jesus calls us to be different. Jesus calls us to shine with the light of the gospel.

We are to resist grumbling in a twisted world, but instead we are called to shine, as we live now in light of the glory that is to come.

By Clinging to God's Word

That's nice. That's good.

But how do we actually do that? Because while that is simple, it's not easy.

And here, Paul gives us two things that should help us.

The first, is that Paul tells us we are enabled to do this, in part, by clinging to God's Word.

In verse 14 Paul writes "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." In verse 15 he explains that this is to be done "in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world," and then in verse 16 he adds that as we seek to do this, we are to be "holding fast to the word of life"

We are called here to resist grumbling in a twisted world, but instead shine, by, first, clinging to God's Word.

Because God's word should reorient us. When we are lost in the ways of this twisted world, when we are being tossed to and fro by the currents of our broken world, and so giving in to grumbling and disputing and discontentedness, God's Word – the Scriptures, the Bible – is supposed to ground us, and reorient us.

And what does it reorient us towards?

Well, a number of things. But Paul highlights one here, in this text: God's word reorients us towards God's future promises in the gospel – and specifically Christ's future coming.

And Rejoicing in Christ's Future Coming

In fact, looking, through the Bible, to the future is key to resisting grumbling in the present.

And this comes out in verses 16 and 18. First, in the middle of verse 16, Paul shifts their focus to "the day of Christ." This is a reference to Christ's final coming, in glory and power, when he will reign over all the earth, and he will raise all people from the grave, and those who have trusted him and followed him he will raise to everlasting life with him, in a new heavens and a new earth, forever.

So Paul shifts his focus to this future event – Christ's final coming in glory and power. And then, he adds in verse 18, that in light of all this, the Christians and Philippi should rejoice.

Now, what does this have to do with grumbling and disputing?

Well, the fact that Jesus is going to come back – the fact that he will raise up those who trust in him, the fact that he will bless them for all eternity – that should reframe how we approach the difficulties, the frustrations, and the suffering we face in this life now. It should reframe it in such a way that when we see it rightly, we should be able to say with Paul, in verse 16, that if we live faithfully, then we "did not run in vain or labor in vain."

And it does that by reframing our difficulties now in terms of relief, reward, and rehabilitation.

First, it reframes our current frustrations and sufferings in terms of relief.

If we have trusted in Christ, then every struggle we face – whether very small or very big – all of it is time-limited. It will end. And relief will come.

Because when Jesus comes back, he will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away. [Revelation 21:4]

While we may struggle now, we need not despair, or hand ourselves over to a grumbling spirit, because we know that total and complete relief from every trial will come when Christ returns.

Second, the future coming of Jesus reframes how we approach our current frustrations and sufferings and disappointments in terms of reward.

To slightly modify an illustration Tim Keller has used before, imagine two scenarios where you have a very difficult job. It's a job you don't like. It's a job that involves frustrations, and unpleasantness – sacrifice and suffering. And it's so bad, that as you look around your workplace, you are struck that a lot of other people's jobs there seem better than yours.

But then imagine you learned that after doing that job for one year, you were going to receive a bonus, so long as you did your job faithfully (not perfectly, just faithfully).

In one scenario the bonus was going to be \$500 dollars. That might be nice. But ... it comes out to just an extra \$10 a week, really ... which isn't really a lot for all you have to put up with ... and so you'd probably still grumble about your situation or even get into disputes about it with those above you, and below you, and beside you. You would probably still not be a very happy worker.

But then, imagine a second scenario where you had the same job, but you were told if you did your job faithfully (not perfectly, just faithfully), then at the end of the year you'd receive a \$5 million dollar bonus. \$5 million just for doing your job – difficult as it may be – faithfully. That's about an extra \$100,000 per week – an extra \$19,000 a day – and extra \$2,400 an hour ... \$40 a minute ... If you knew then that that was the reward waiting for you ... would you grumble about your job? Would you dispute over petty issues with coworkers? Or would you put up with it, with a smile on your face and a bounce in your step, because you knew what was coming at the end of it all? My guess is that that \$5 million dollar bonus would transform how you approached your work.

But, of course, here's the thing: The kind of rewards that Jesus promises to his people who do what he calls them to do faithfully (not perfectly, but just faithfully) – the kind of rewards Jesus promises at the resurrection are so jaw-dropping that they will make \$5 million dollars look kind of sad and pathetic.

That's why the Apostle Paul can say that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” at Christ's return. [Romans 8:18]

The promise of Christ's return means we will receive not just relief, but also staggering rewards for our faithfulness.

Finally, the future coming of Jesus reframes our current frustrations and sufferings and disappointments in terms of rehabilitation.

We are, in this life, spiritually disordered and dysfunctional because of sin. But as we come to Christ by faith, God, in his mercy, begins to work on us – to repair and rehabilitate our hearts and souls. In fact, the Apostle Paul tells us that God works all things in the life of his people for their good. [Romans 8:28] And often, the good he is working out is their spiritual growth and healing – their sanctification – their spiritual rehabilitation.

But here's the thing ... physical rehab can often involve repeated and frustrating exercises. And spiritual rehab is often the same.

I don't know if you've ever done physical therapy or anything like that before ... I have ... and it really helped me. But it's kind of annoying, right? Who wants to do those exercises they give you? They can feel tedious, and pointless, because they're usually not the actual thing we want to do. And yet ... they're what we need if we're going to be healed and strengthened to do what we want to do.

I went to physical therapy because I wanted to be able to swim laps again without shoulder pain after damaging my rotator cuff. That's what I wanted. And what I was told to do was to stand in my living room, holding cans of soup, and slowly lifting them up and down with my arms outstretched, like an idiot. That's not fun. That's annoying. It's frustrating. It's tedious.

And yet ... it worked. It healed the part of me that was damaged. I reached my goal and got back in the pool.

But, before it worked, in order to approach it rightly. I had to frame it in terms of the hoped for outcome. With the outcome in mind, I could lift those soup cans with joy. Because I could tell myself that each time I lift them, I was one step closer to that hoped-for future version of me. That's how you supposed to approach physical therapy and rehabilitation. (I'm not saying that's how I always did it – but that's what you're supposed to do.)

Most of us want to be more loving ... we want to be more patient ... we want to be more kind and content ... if we're Christians, then we want to be more like Jesus. We want our souls rehabilitated to what they were meant to be.

But ordinarily, God doesn't fix our hearts in one big act. Ordinarily, he does it through countless little exercises – situations he puts us in and then asks us to faithfully walk through ... with love ... and kindness ... and without grumbling or disputing.

And each time we do what he's called us to, he is strengthening something good in us ... and healing something broken in us. Not all at once, but bit by bit.

With each person who disappoints you, each situation that frustrates you, each aspect in your life that is not really as you want it to be ... God is handing you a soup can and telling you just to lift it up. It's a small opportunity to strengthen your spiritual muscles – a small opportunity to correct a damaged moral ligament in your soul. The question is, will you take the can and lift it faithfully

... and so move one step closer to who you're meant to be ... or will you toss it to the ground, and walk away ... grumbling about how it's frustrating, and stupid, and pointless?

Christ's second coming reminds us of the promised outcome: the day when we will be made new, and fully be who we were meant to be. Don't you want to get a bit closer to being like that now? Every trial, every frustration, is a chance to do that – if we engage with it faithfully, instead of with grumbling and discontentedness.

Even when the situations the Lord puts us in feel tedious and mundane, he is using them to rehabilitate our souls. And so ... we should rejoice in them, rather than grumble.

Relief, reward, and rehabilitation. This is how the final coming of Christ reframes the struggles and frustrations we face now, so that we can rejoice in them, and shine, rather than grumble and dispute.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we live in a world that is filled with grumbling and disputing. It weakens our institutions. It corrodes our relationships. It disfigures our souls. But it's all around us – it's the air we breathe. And far too often, we – as God's people – conform to it, and blend in.

But Jesus calls us instead to shine. He calls us to look to his Word, and to rejoice in his future coming, and see the relief, and the rewards, the rehabilitation, and the restoration he has promised us in the gospel.

And so, let us seek to be different.

Let us seek to shine and to rejoice.

Because God is at work.

And in his presence is fulness of joy.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Lewis, C. S. *The Great Divorce*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1946 (2001 Edition).

Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996 Print Edition.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must

exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.