

**“QUIT `YER WHINING!”**

*“Do everything without complaining...”*

**A young guy decides to join a monastery.**

**But, the requirements are very strict. And, at his orientation the head abbot tells him that all the monks are required to take a total vow of silence.**

**They’re not permitted to talk at all!**

**But, every ten years – and only every ten years -- they’d be brought in and would be allowed to speak just two words.**

**So, the guy thinks it over. He joins – takes his vow of silence. And, after ten years, the head abbot brings him in and asks for his two words.**

*“Cold floors,”* the man says.

The abbot nods and sends him away.

Well, after another ten years, the man is brought back again for his two words. And, this time he says, *“Bad food.”*

Again, the abbot nods his head and dismisses him.

Finally, after “another” ten years, the man is brought back again for his two words. And, this time he says, *“I quit!”*

*“Well, I’m not surprised,”* the abbot says.

*“You’ve done nothing but complain since you got here.”*

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**Or consider this...**

**A guy boards a flight and is surprised to find a parrot sitting in the seat next to him.**

**The flight takes off. And, no sooner than it does the parrot starts squawking and harassing the flight attendant about her slow service.**

***“Get me a soda right now, or I’ll have your job!”*** the parrot demands.

**So, the flight attendant brings back a soda for the parrot but forgets the cup of coffee the man seated next to the bird had asked for.**

***“There’s too much ice!”*** the parrot bawls, as he throws the cup back in the flight attendant’s face.

***“This time you better get it right!”***

**So, she brings another soda with less ice – but is so shaken up she again forgets the man’s coffee.**

**Well, the guy’s watching all this and figures the only way he’s gonna get any kind of service is to try the parrot’s approach.**

**So, he bellows at the flight attendant, *“Look you lazy slug, I’ve asked you twice for a coffee. So, you better get it right now – or else!”***

**Well, apparently this was the straw that broke the camel’s back and the flight attendant runs down the aisle sobbing.**

**The next thing the man knows, two burly attendants appear and toss him and the parrot out the emergency exit of the plane.**

**And, as they’re plunging toward the earth, the parrot turns to the man and says, *“Boy, for someone who can’t fly, you sure complain a lot!”***

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**What is it about “complaining” that we’re all so good at it?**

**I mean, can you think of a day when either you or somebody you know didn’t complain about something?**

**Anything?**

**Complaining is almost second-nature to most of us. We do it without thinking. And yet, there’re probably few things more destructive to us individually and, together as a community, than a constantly critical spirit.**

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**Now, the reason I want to talk about this today isn’t because we’ve got some great controversy brewing here at the church.**

**In fact, nothing could be further from the truth!**

**To my knowledge everybody’s happy and healthy. Nobody’s life is perfect, but generally we’re doing okay.**

**Sure, we’d appreciate a little warmer weather. But, it’s all good.**

**So, there isn’t some underlying problem I’m trying to address.**

**Rather, the inspiration for talking about this today comes from an article that appeared a few weeks ago in our local edition of *The Advocate*.**

**I don’t know if you saw it, but in the “*Faith*” section of the paper on January 1<sup>st</sup>, there was a half-page article about our church’s recent fundraising project for the organ.**

**It was a great article!**

**They had a picture of our own Ann Robinson at the organ looking very angelic – fingers poised on the keyboard ready for action.**

**And, except for a few misquotes and one really major misspelling...**

**And, those of you who read the article know what I mean!**

**(I haven't laughed that hard in years!)**

**Except for that, it was a really good article and did a nice job reporting on how hard the church worked to raise \$15,000 in just a few weeks.**

**So, all in all – good stuff!**

**But, when I read the article online, I also happened to notice there were several reader comments following.**

**And, before I clicked on those comments, I knew...**

**I just knew...**

**There'd be someone criticizing the church for spending that much money just to repair an organ!**

**In fact, even before looking I could anticipate what they might say...**

***“Would Jesus spend \$15,000 on an organ?”***

***“Shouldn't the money be used to help the poor?”***

***“Another example of why I don't like organized religion” – which makes me wonder if perhaps their preference is “disorganized religion.”***

**Point is – I knew – even before I looked -- that someone was going to have a problem with it and complain!**

**And, that's exactly what happened!**

**In fact, one reader even went so far to say that, *“places of worship do nothing for their common man.”***

**Well, like I said, these comments didn't surprise me!**

**I expected them.**

**But, it really made me wonder why our first impulse – no matter who we are – is often to criticize rather than bless!**

**And, this isn't an insignificant issue!**

**I mean, I know we've just come off a sermon series in which we've wrestled with grand themes of God's Grace and Redemption. And so, a message about "complaining" seems so...**

**Well, it seems so pedestrian!**

**But, a "critical" spirit has been likened to cancer of the soul...**

**Something that gradually eats away and destroys from within.**

**It affects individuals!**

**It affects marriages and families!**

**It affects us in the workplace!**

**And, it has a particularly devastating effect on churches where people assume that followers of Jesus Christ should know better and should exemplify a more excellent way.**

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**Some years ago I asked Pastor Ernie and an elder to help me confront a member who seemed to always be badmouthing the church.**

**Now, maybe "confront" is too strong of a word. Because as we met we assured this person of the church's care and concern for them – but that this type of destructive behavior had to stop!**

**And, the funny thing was that this person knew what they were doing was wrong.**

**They admitted it -- saying how they've been told before that they have unrealistic expectations of others.**

**And, after our little sit-down things got better – for a while.**

**But, bit by bit the complaining started up again and the cycle began anew.**

**So, why do we complain so much?**

**What’s behind this spiritual discontent that seems to affect so many in our world today?**

**And, as God’s people, what can we do to counteract the destruction and devastation a critical spirit brings?**

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**Now, perhaps you think I’m overstating the issue.**

**I mean, on the surface, “complaining” really isn’t so bad – is it?**

**A little annoying perhaps...**

**But, it hardly ranks up there with all the worst sins we can imagine...**

**Arrogant pride...**

**Fiery anger...**

**Uncontrollable lust...**

**Insatiable greed!**

**So, you like to complain a little every now and again!**

**What’s the big deal?**

**But, as our Scripture lesson shows us, “complaining” is a serious spiritual condition that -- at its core -- demonstrates a lack of faith in God and in what God’s doing in our lives and in the world around us!**

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Now, as we consider the Israelites today, the most important thing to notice is “where” they are as they begin complaining again.

I say “again” because this isn’t the first time they’ve grumbled against Moses and against God.

You see, one of the luxuries of focusing on the Israelites just after they left Egypt, is that there’re any number of Scripture passages that show them complaining – grumbling – and otherwise just sporting a bad attitude in the early days after the Exodus.

I mean, these guys were world class complainers!

They complained while they were in Egypt that the Egyptians were mistreating them and working them to death!

They complained when God sent Moses to rescue them and things temporarily got worse before they started getting better!

They complained after Moses led them out of Egypt that the Egyptians were coming to kill `em!

They complained when they couldn’t find suitable drinking water right away – even though they were in a desert!

They complained when their provisions started running low and accused Moses and Aaron of inept leadership and of bringing them into the wilderness just to starve them to death.

And, here today, they complained about finding water “again” even though...

**EVEN THOUGH...**

Each and every time before God had met their needs in the most dramatic ways!

**They complained about everything!**

**Now, just so you know, it's not that their concerns weren't legitimate.**

**In Exodus 12, the Scriptures tell us that 600,000 men alone came up out of Egypt – not counting women and children and unnamed others.**

**And, scholars estimate that the total population of the Exodus might have been as high as 2 million people – and, on top of that, we've got to remember were all their flocks and herds.**

**So, food and water wasn't just a luxury!**

**It was a necessity! They needed a lot of it!**

**But, like I said, the most important thing to notice is exactly “where” they were when the complaining begins again.**

**They were in the desert – of course – heading to Mount Sinai where they would receive the Law from God.**

**But, that's not what I mean!**

**I don't mean “Where were they physically?” They were on the Sinai Peninsula – we know that!**

**Rather...**

**“Where were they mentally?”**

**“Where were they emotionally and spiritually?”**

**“Where were they in their relationship with God?”**

**You see, as professor and author Terrence Fretheim points out, “*This was a community on the move – from a past act of redemption [which was the***

**Exodus from Egypt, of course] – *toward a promised goal* [which was the Promised Land itself]**

**In other words – they were somewhere in the middle!**

**Somewhere between the “Already” of Divine Deliverance and the “Not Yet” of Promised Fulfillment.**

**And, in this “in-between” time...**

**A time curiously not unlike our own time today...**

**But, in this “in-between” time, they found it easy to lose focus and start complaining about all their trials and challenges and burdens...**

**Wondering whether or not God was still with them...**

**Instead of taking their troubles to God in prayer and asking how the LORD might be using these things to make them into a special community of people who were uniquely His!**

**So, all these complaints – all their grumbling – weren’t just a bunch of petty grievances that could easily be worked out.**

**Moses understood that!**

**That’s why as hard as all the grumbling was on him personally, he knew it was really the LORD the Israelites were putting to the test.**

**And, he knew that it was indicative of a deeply troubling spiritual condition...**

**A condition that ultimately took 40 years in the wilderness for the Israelites to overcome!**

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**So, am I saying that you should never complain...**

**Or that you're a bad person and spiritually immature if you ever complain about anything?**

**Not at all!**

**Let me explain what I mean...**

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**Some years ago I went on a trip to Israel with my graduating class from seminary.**

**We flew over and got to our hotel in Jerusalem.**

**But, curiously, while everybody else's room was somewhere upstairs in the hotel, me and my buddy and one other set of folks were assigned rooms kinda in the sub-basement.**

**Well, no big deal, I thought.**

**Not as convenient – but no big deal!**

**That is, until I opened the door to our room and was met by the overpowering stench of mildew and felt the carpet literally squish beneath my feet.**

**It was clear they'd had a flood of some kind and the rooms simply weren't habitable.**

**So, my buddy and I went to the desk to see about getting our room changed and found the other set of folks assigned down there already arguing with the desk clerk.**

**You see, it was a busy hotel and the clerk didn't want to change their room.**

**But, this other guy – who happened to be on the seminary's Board of Trustees -- was kind of a bigwig – and he wasn't taking "No" for an answer!**

**In fact, he raised quite a stink!**

**He was mad! And, I thought to myself, “*Hey, this is good! Let’s just ride his coattails into getting another room ourselves!*”**

**And, that’s exactly what happened!**

**This guy caused such a fuss that they came up with new rooms for each of us.**

**So, I’m not saying there’s never a time to air legitimate concerns or grievances.**

**But, what I am saying is that far too often God’s people are focused on “complaining” when our energies should be directed toward prayer and thankfulness and looking for creative ways to partner with God in His redemptive work instead.**

**For example...**

**Back when I was a youth pastor in Cleveland I knew a couple named Phil and Wilma.**

**Phil and Wilma were an older couple – probably the age of my grandparents. But, for some reason – let’s call it Grace – Phil and Wilma took a liking to me and Faith and became huge supporters of the youth programs.**

**They’d show up at the church early in the mornings to cook pancakes for the kids...**

**They offered to host various events for the youth.**

**And, even after we left and went to seminary, Phil and Wilma always insisted that whenever we came back to Cleveland that we stay with them in their home.**

**They were just lovely – lovely people! And, I became a better human being just for knowing them.**

**But, I'll always remember a time when some folks in the church began "complaining" about the youth...**

**That the kids were breaking stuff in the gym and were being too hard on the building.**

**And, they were right!**

**The kids had accidently broken stuff in the gym and weren't always as careful as you and I might have been.**

**And, Phil could have complained too!**

**I mean, he was an older man. These kids weren't his responsibility.**

**There was nothing in it for him or for Wilma.**

**Being on Session it only made more work for him!**

**But, you know what Phil did?**

**Whenever someone complained about something being broken, Phil would say, "*Well, let's just fix it and make it so it won't get broken again.*"**

**And, that's what he did!**

**Using all his God-given gifts as an engineer, Phil bolted metal cages around fragile exit signs that were often on the receiving end of errant basketballs...**

**He reinforced pipes that were simply too inviting for people not to swing on, so that it really didn't matter even if a guerilla happened to grab hold of it!**

**Instead of "complaining" Phil came up with solutions that blessed everybody and glorified God instead.**

**And, I've never forgotten the example he set!**

**You see, this is a positive approach to addressing legitimate needs.**

**And, this is the approach the Bible calls us to take when it says:**

**Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...**

*In which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...*

**Have you ever thought of yourself as a “shining star?”**

**Friends...**

**Jesus Christ – whom the Scriptures say, “...*was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth*” (Isaiah 53:7)...**

**In other words – who didn’t complain...**

**And, who went to the cross for sins that weren’t His...**

**Jesus calls us to a better way than simply complaining ourselves!**

**He calls us to the practice of intentional joy and thanksgiving and gratitude – not because everything in our lives are always peachy-keen...**

**Or, because we won’t ever have problems.**

**Jesus Himself said, “*In this world you will have trouble.*”**

**But, then He added...**

**“*But take heart! I have overcome the world!*” (John 16:33).**

**Like I said, at its core, it’s a spiritual issue!**

**And, people who call Christ “Lord,” are also called to exemplify a better way!**

**A way that shows we really trust God's in charge...**

**And, that He's making a difference through the Holy Spirit working in people like us – His “shining stars!”**

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**In his book, *The Me I Want To Be*, pastor and author John Ortberg says:**

**Not long ago I boarded an airport shuttle bus to get to the rental car lot. Driving a shuttle bus is usually a thankless job, for the driver is often regarded as the low man on the totem pole. People on the bus are often grumpy from travel and in a hurry to get to their car, No one says much except the name of their rental car company.**

**But not on this bus.**

**The man who drove the bus was an absolute delight. He was scanning the curbside, looking for anybody who needed a ride. “*You know,*” he told us, *“I’m always looking because sometimes people are running late. You can tell it in their eyes. I’m always looking because I never want to miss one.”***

***“Hey, here’s another one!...”***

**The driver pulled over to pick up a latecomer, and he was so excited about what he was doing that *we* got excited, We were actually cheering him on when he was picking people up. It was like watching Jesus drive a shuttle bus. The man would grab people’s luggage before they could lift it, then he would jump back on the bus and say, *“Well, we’re off. I know you’re all eager to get there as quickly as possible, so I’m going to get you there as soon as I can.”***

**Jaded commuters put down their papers. He created such a little community of joy on that bus that people wanted to ride around in the terminal a second time just to hang out with the guy. We would say to people who got on after us, *“Watch this guy!”* He wasn’t just our shuttle bus driver – he was our leader; he was our friend. And for a few moments, community flourished. On a shuttle bus for a rental**

**car company -- one person moved toward the best version of himself.**

**Then Ortberg adds:**

**What happened to that shuttle bus driver can happen in you.**

**It can, you know!**

**It can when you really desire to live a more excellent way...**

**And, let the critical spirit we so often let drive our lives be replaced by the Spirit of joy that's found in Jesus Christ alone!**

**Amen.**