

Grumbling—A Look At A “Little” Sin

by Paul David Tripp

Introduction

Why a sermon on grumbling in an issue on depression? Depression can be an occasion for grumbling, depression can be intensified by grumbling, and depression can even be caused by unchecked grumbling. This sermon by Paul Tripp is relevant to everyone, but especially consider its application to the problem of depression.

When I was growing up, one of the phrases that I liked to hear the most from my dad was, “Let’s go fishing!” On my dad’s day off, he’d take us to Lake Erie, where we’d rent a little boat with a motor. My dad would fix the gear for us, using a spreader so we could hang two hooks. One hook wasn’t enough because there were so many perch. It wasn’t really fishing: we just dragged the hook through the school, and got fish by the tail, belly, and gill, and sometimes by the mouth. It was great for us kids. We would load washtubs full of the perch, and then go home excited to watch our dad fillet them. I can smell right now the aroma of those fish frying. Those were wonderful times!

But something happened to that glorious lake. It didn’t seem like a big thing. Factories and housing developments began to spring up all around Lake Erie, and they started dropping pollutants in the water. One development doesn’t seem like a big deal. It doesn’t seem possible that it could destroy such a huge lake. But that daily drip from all those little factories and develop-

ments destroyed that majestic lake. I remember just before I left home to get married, I walked along the shores of Lake Erie and watched the dead fish float onto the beach—bloated, ugly fish that couldn’t live in the water anymore. The industry and housing didn’t seem like a big thing. It seemed like a little thing. But by the time I got married, you could just about walk across Lake Erie to Canada. A huge lake had been destroyed by what seemed like a little thing.

Such is the danger inherent in grumbling. You know, we live with grumbling all the time. Isn’t it amazing that we human beings can stand in front of a closet full of clothes and say we don’t have a thing to wear? Or stand in front of a refrigerator full of food and say there’s nothing to eat? We are angry at the food and go on diets because we’re convinced that anything that ever tasted good is fattening. Isn’t it remarkable that we have wonderful activity-filled lives full of meaning and purpose, and we grumble that we’re way too busy? Or that we can look at everything that exists and find some reason to complain? Grumbling may seem like a little thing—a little sin—but I would like to propose to you that grumbling is a pollutant in the waters of your heart. It will kill life.

Deuteronomy 1:19-35 presents grumbling in a serious context. Moses recounts incidents in the life of Israel, just as Israel is ready to enter the promised land.

Then, as the LORD our God commanded us, we set out from Horeb and went toward the hill country of the Amorites toward all that vast and dreadful desert that you have seen, and so we reached Kadesh Barnea. Then I said to you, "You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which the LORD our God is giving us. See, the LORD your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the LORD, the God

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of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

Then all of you came to me and said, "Let us send some men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take to the towns we will come to."

The idea seemed good to me; so I selected twelve of you, one man from each tribe. They left and went up into the hill country, and came to the Valley of Eshcol and explored it. Taking with them some of the fruit of the land, they brought it down to us and reported, "It is a good land the LORD our God is giving us."

But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. Where can we go? Our brothers have made us lose heart. They say, 'The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. We even saw the Anakites there.'"

Then I said to you, "Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the desert. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place."

In spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God, who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to

search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go. When the LORD heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore: "Not a man of this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your forefathers...."

What a powerful passage of Scripture! Maybe grumbling isn't such a little thing. Luke 6:45 says it's "out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks." "Talk problems" are always heart problems. Your talk reveals your heart. We don't want to believe that. We want to believe: "It's my husband who makes me angry." "It's my wife who make me angry." "It's my boss." "It's my car." "It's the dog." Grumbling always reveals the condition of my heart.

I want to make a contrast between two lifestyles: a complaint-based and a thank-based lifestyle. Some of us have a complaint-based lifestyle. It has three elements.

Why do we complain? First of all, we want a life without obstacles. Can you relate to that? We want kids that are self-parenting. We believe that God actually made a mistake in marriage, that sanctification was supposed to be completed before marriage, not after. We want fully glorified people to be in our lives. I want a wife who thinks I'm summarily wonderful, who agrees with me that I'm always right, who respects my every word. I want a life that's free of suffering and of obstacles. I want no financial problems. Can you relate to that? Very few of us wake up in the morning and say, "Lord, You have said in Your Word that suffering is one of Your main tools to complete us. Let me pray for a little more of that today in my life. You are such a good God. One of Your greatest gifts is that You have called me to identify with the sufferings of Christ. Bring it on!" It doesn't take much to spoil our day. For some of us, a flat tire will do it. We want an obstacle-free life.

God wants obstacles in your life for some very important reasons. Those obstacles are His primary way of completing His work in you. God is not done with you yet. He is doing something awesome. He's taking us poor sinners and conforming us to the image of His Son. He has said that His goal for us is to partake in His divine nature. Isn't that amazing? That we would partake of His divine nature, and things would come out of us that are nothing less than divine? The presence and power of God have come and radically changed us. That's what He is doing. His principal tool is trial. Husbands and wives, put on your crash helmets and fasten your seat belts. God doesn't want you to have a problem-free marriage. He wants obstacles in your lives. He'll bring rough places. He wants valleys for you because He wants to complete you.

He will work through obstacles for you to see His glory. He wants you to stand and watch His glory be revealed. Isaiah 6:3 says, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory." But you and I miss it. We can be blind to the glory of God in our lives. So God puts us in situations where nothing else can explain what happened other than the glory of God. You can't stand on the other side of the Red Sea and say, "Boy, we sure figured that one out!" You stand at the edge of the Red Sea, and in your utter poverty you say, "You are grand and glorious beyond anything we could ever imagine!" That's what God wants us to see. And He has to put obstacles in front of us that are so huge, we can't figure them out ourselves. But a complaint-based life doesn't want obstacles. It doesn't see the value of obstacles. It wants life to be a resort.

The second element of a complaint-based lifestyle is that it desires a life without any need to trust. God will cast us into situations where there's no hope for us but to trust Him, where we're beyond our strength and wisdom. Our hope is not that we will get our act together, but that a Redeemer has come and has filled us with His glory and grace. Therefore, I am not afraid of human weakness. His grace is sufficient; His strength is made perfect in weakness. However, I am scared to death of the delusions of human strength that would keep me from relying on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm not smart enough to parent my kids. I'm not wise enough to be a good husband. My life balances on a lively trust in the Lord who has come.

The third thing a complaint-based lifestyle does is seek to find life in the creation rather than in the Creator. It begins to believe the lie of lies from the garden of Eden—that somehow outside of the Lord I can find life. The lie is that life can be found in human acceptance, in human love, in position, and possession. In this way, I deify the creation and forget the Creator. I grumble every time it seems like the creation is falling through my hands like sand. Then I grow angry, uptight, fearful, and discouraged.

The Bible tells us that the blessings the Lord gives us in this physical world are meant to hook us to a deeper sense of need. Christ gave bread to fill the stomachs of people so they would understand that their deeper need was the bread of life: deeper blessings that can only be found in Him. Romans 1:25 says we tend to exchange worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of the created thing. Brothers and sisters, you have to start here. Realize that a life of grumbling is not an anomaly, but it reveals what is in your heart. Yes, I do want life to be a resort. No, I don't want to be cast on the Lord in distinctive moments of trust. Yes, I do find life in the creation rather than in the Cre-

ator. Do you hear the background drone in the life of grumbling? *My life is a complaint.*

Think of it this way. The glasses through which the grumbler looks at life have lenses that see only a life of ease. But life in this fallen world is *not* easy. God's work of progressive sanctification is not easy, and it was not meant to be. God is reforming us with hammers of redemption. He is turning complainers into thank-givers.

Why live thankfully? Let's look at the thank-based lifestyle. First of all, it rests in the *presence* of the Lord. He is Immanuel: God came to dwell with us. My little

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pea brain can't imagine it, but the Bible tells me that this God of glory and power has come by His Spirit to indwell me. How near is God? He is literally inside of me! If you can grasp that, it will radically change the way you live life. We're not like everybody else, trying to slug it through life. The Redeemer has come and has made us His dwelling place. Therefore, we can have renewed faith and courage and a different way of looking at life because now we look at life from the vantage point of the presence of the Lord.

Second, the thank-based lifestyle allows us to look at life from the vantage point of God's *power*. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul is so excited about the glories of God's grace that his words pour out like a dump truck unloading. He's like a kid at the end of a couple weeks of camp who wants to tell all his experiences at once. The words flood out in the first few chapters of Ephesians, and reach a crescendo at Ephesians 3:20: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine [you can feel Paul stretching the language to try to say it all], according to his power [this just blows my mind] that is at work [where?] within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."

God knew my condition was so desperate that it wasn't enough for Him just to forgive me: He literally had to unzip my soul and get inside of me! God is a God of awesome glory and awesome grace. You can't capture Him with human thoughts or human words. Yet Isaiah tries to when he asks: "Who has measured

the waters in the hollow of his hand?" (Is. 40:12). Imagine that. Pour water in your hand and see how much you can hold. God can take all the water in the universe, hold it in the hollow of His hand, and it won't spill. God is the only one who has never had a counselor and never had a teacher, whereas I only say things I've learned from somebody else. One of my favorite "theologians," guitarist Keith Richards, said, "I never played a lick I didn't steal." We've all been taught. Imagine knowing everything from origin to destiny

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and beyond, and never having a teacher. Yet you can sense that Isaiah has pushed the language as far as it can go, and he still can't grasp who God is. That God, in all His power and glory, has made us His dwelling place.

The third thing a thank-based life does is to live with a powerful awareness of God's *grace*. It is an amazing truth that where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. There is no pit so deep that Jesus can't reach deeper to get you out of it. There is no human condition, thought, word, or action that is beyond the rescuing power of the glorious grace of the Lord Jesus. Even complainers can receive grace!

A thank-based life looks at life from the vantage point of inclusion. We have been included in the people of God. His presence is with us. His power indwells us. His grace covers us. That radically changes the way we look at the harsh realities of life in this fallen world.

Let me illustrate these lifestyles at work. I was preparing to speak at a retreat weekend with my brother, Tedd. We were both young pastors. We were going to speak on faith and give it its "final" definition! We thought we could do this. The church didn't understand faith, but we did! Driving a very old Ford LTD, I got on Route 80 to go across to Western Pennsylvania. I was quite happy with what God had called me to do. It's a wonderful thing to be called to minister God's truth. You get paid for doing that. I was very excited. I headed over a knoll in the hill country of Pennsylvania, a deserted area, and the car died. It was like a major stroke. There was a shudder and then death. The lights went out. I pulled over to the side with the dead car. I'll tell you what I prayed. (I don't know if it's a prayer. I guess complaints are prayers, too.) I said to the Lord, "I am following you out there to that retreat to teach on

faith. Why would you let this happen to me?" I stood there, half being spiritual, and half stewing. You know the mixed motives in our hearts. I didn't want to curse God and die, but yelling at Him felt pretty good. A State policeman pulled up behind me. He said, "What's going on?" I said, "My car died." He said, "You can't leave it here alongside the road. I'll call a tow truck. It's the only thing we can do." I thought I'd never be able to get to my retreat, and I didn't have any money. I mentioned to him that I was heading to a retreat and that I hoped I could get there in time. The tow truck driver pulled up and said, "Where are you going?" I told him where I was heading. He said, "I'd really love to take you there. If I could, I would. But I have to stay put at the gas station in order to patrol this zone." He towed my car to the gas station. I thought, "Here it goes. This is where I really get taken to the cleaners." I sat in the car, and I was still stewing. There was a knock on the window. The man stood there, holding a set of keys. He said, "That Ford Mustang over there is my car. You take it and go wherever you need to go tonight. Those people need to hear what you have to say. When you get done, come back. I'll take care of your car." I couldn't believe it. That man didn't know me from Adam, and his car was much better than mine! This was not a fair trade, and my car was definitely not a deposit. I came back after Tedd and I clarified faith for the Church of Jesus Christ, and I said to the man, "I'm ready to pick up my car, but I don't have a lot of money. What was wrong with it?" He said, "You had major wiring problems. I completely rewired your car. You also burned up your alternator and battery. I found an old alternator to put in, but I had to give you a new battery. I have to at least charge you for the battery, but I'll only charge you what it cost. Your total bill is \$19.00." I looked at him and said, "I don't know how to thank you." He said, "I don't know what happened here. There was something in my heart that made me want to help you, from the moment I picked you up." I said, "I know why. There's a Lord over this whole experience who wanted to teach me something. He raised you up to be His instrument." He said, "In all my years of towing people, no one has ever called me an instrument of God!", and off he walked.

So, what is your paradigm? Do you have a complaint-based view of life, where your lens for looking at life is personal ease? If so, you don't want any obstacles or any need to trust. You want as much of the creation as you can surround yourself with because that's where you find your hope. Or instead, do you have a thank-based lifestyle where you are so aware of the concept of your inclusion in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that you can say, "His presence is with me, His power is

with me, His grace is with me. There's hope. I don't understand what's going on, and I don't have the wisdom or strength. But He is here. There's hope for me!" If so, that will change the way you live.

I have had the opportunity to go to India several times. I stood in New Delhi, Northern India, at one of the most horrible slums that exist. I stood transfixed for a moment, looking at a three-year-old boy leaning against the cot of his infirm mother. He had the distended stomach and hollow eyes of a starving child, and his face was fly-infested. I stood there with tears streaming down my face. It wasn't just compassion. (I did want to rescue him and take him home.) But it was the awareness that he didn't choose to be where he was, any more than I chose to be where I was. I was filled with deeper gratitude than I think I have ever felt in my life. I was raised in one of the richest countries in the history of humanity. I was raised in a loving family, and received a tremendous education. I was raised to come to Christ early in my life. I was given such glorious things. You could not explain the difference between that little boy and me by anything other than the Lord. I was filled with awesome gratitude for the Lord. I stood there in that slum, and I felt every complaint I had ever spoken as if they were a weight on my shoulders. When I came home, I spoke with one of the church leaders from India who had come to Philadelphia to study. I said, "John, I want to ask you what you think of Americans. You've been here for awhile." Indians are very polite people. He said, "Do you want me to be honest?" I said, "I sure do." He said something I'll never forget. "You have no idea how much you have, and yet you always complain." What powerful words.

I want to display for you some of the fruit of this complaint-based lifestyle of grumbling. First of all, grumbling always blames others and, in so doing, *destroys relationships*. What did the people of Israel do? They blamed the whole situation on the spies. They said, "Our brothers have come here with this report. They made us lose heart. It's their fault. If they could have given us a more positive report, we would have been okay."

Next, grumbling *rejects ministry*. Moses came and said, "Don't you remember who God is? He's the God who brought you out of Egypt. He's still with you. He's still here. We're going to see His glory once again." Grumbling doesn't want to hear truth, because grumbling doesn't want to be comforted. Grumbling wants what it wants. "Just don't give me the truth."

I know a lady who has a very harsh husband. In many ways, she has been broken by his meanness. One day I was sharing with her the glorious love of the Lord. She started pounding on the arm of her chair, say-

ing, "I don't want you to tell me that God loves me. I want a *husband* who loves me." I didn't have anything better to offer her. I gave her my best thing, and she spit it back in my face. Grumbling rejects ministry because it doesn't want truth. It wants what it wants.

Grumbling *forgets grace* because the grumbler wants to be strong, ready, and prepared. Yet, the most important things on our agenda weren't planned by us. God planned them. The most significant moments of our

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lives are moments we wouldn't have chosen to have. God chose them for us. Grumbling forgets grace because it wants to be able and ready on its own.

Grumbling also *questions the Lord*. Isn't it incredible that God, in all His awesome glory, goodness, and grace, would be brought into a human court and judged? What terrible words are in this passage: "The LORD hates us so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us" (Deut. 1:27). What a charge! You answer, "I would never say that!" Have you ever wondered, if God really loves you why, then, did He let "X" into your life? The same charge! If God really loved me, why would He give me this husband? If God really loved me, why would He let this happen to my kids? If God really loved me, why wouldn't He help us with our finances? If, if, if! That's bringing God into the court of human judgment. How dare we! Grumbling asks questions of the Lord and His purposes.

Finally, grumbling *produces rebellion*. It's hard to follow someone you don't trust. It's hard to follow someone with whom you're angry. Grumbling is not the soil of courageous acts of faith. In fact, it leads the way to the very rebellion with which all of us struggle.

Can you see, then, how grumbling is not just a little thing? Grumbling is the background drone of a discontent heart. We can often have a "big sin" or "big problem" focus—both about ourselves and in trying to minister to others. Drug addiction, immorality, suicide threats, a disintegrating or violent marriage, those are "big." But how often do we miss the presence of "little sins"—the drip, drip, drip of grumbling and complaining? Why does a marriage go on the rocks? Why does life seem hopeless and miserable? Why does adultery seem so alluring? Why shoot up

dope or get drunk? In each case a lifestyle of grumbling may wrap around the more visible problem that attracts all the attention. And persistent little sins will stand in the way of change.

We can have a “DSM-666” focus on the “big” sins that causes us to miss how serious grumbling really is. Let’s not have a diagnostic mentality that looks at the human condition in ways different from how God

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looks at us. In the Bible’s view, our problems are more mundane than extraordinary, more normal than abnormal, more little than large. When you “grumble in your tent,” life looks grim, and you end up acting in rebellion. We minister to people who are just like ourselves: skilled artists who daily get out the spray can of black paint and paint the world dark! We are skilled at being unhappy. We say, “God must hate me, because...If God loved me, He would...”

So, how do we change? Rather than just saying to ourselves, “I can’t grumble anymore, and I’m not going to let any grumbling out of my mouth,” or just rending our garments, we need to rend our hearts. Begin with heart confession. Say before the Lord, “Yes, Lord, I have had a complaint-based lifestyle. I want my life to be

easy. I curse obstacles. I don’t like moments of trust. I’ve tried to find life in the creation. I have forgotten my inclusion in the family of faith, and in Your presence, power, and grace.” Isaiah 53 expresses the hope we have:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. (v. 7)

This is the hope of the gospel: Jesus refused to grumble, so that in your grumbling there would be forgiveness. Isn’t that precious? We ought to praise the Lord that Jesus wouldn’t be a grumbler in His willingness to go silently to the cross. Embrace that hope. Jesus not only forgives: He delivers. He not only delivers: He reconciles. He not only reconciles: He restores. How can you move from a complaint-based lifestyle to a thank-based lifestyle? He has already provided everything you need for that. Let’s pray.

Lord, we thank You for the way Your Word speaks to our experience. We are people who complain, and thus bring You into the court of our judgment. We forget our inclusion in the people of God, the glories of Your presence and power, and the boundless benefits of Your grace. So we curse obstacles and hate moments when we have nothing left but to trust. We grab for the creation, hoping that it will fill us. Please forgive us. We rest in the sacrifice of the One who would not grumble, and in His silent obedience that purchased for us forgiveness, freedom, deliverance, reconciliation, and restoration. We worship You. We confess to You. We rest in You. In Jesus’ name, Amen.