No Place For Complaining  
Phl. 2:14-16  
Englewood Baptist Church  
Sunday morning, Oct. 30, 2011

Turn in your Bible to Phl. 2.

Today we continue our series in the epistle of joy, Philippians. This letter is penned by Paul, often designated as the “theologian of joy.” 16 times in the letter he refers to this state of happiness, this positive emotion that permeated his life. Paul’s joy references crescendo in chapter 4 with this command: Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say rejoice.”

Paul had earned the right to speak such a crazy command. He had proven that he had obtained it! His joy was clearly beyond the reach of his enemies and this is what he desired for his friends in Philippi. He writes from prison, and yet the tone of the letter is sweet and hopeful and uplifting and inspiring.

A person who has a long history of wife abuse probably shouldn’t be teaching the Marriage Enrichment class at his church. He has not yet earned the right to be an authority. The person who owes the IRS millions probably shouldn’t be teaching the Financial Peace Class. He has not yet earned the right to the mic.

You cannot give to others that which you have not obtained yourself. But Paul was qualified to speak out on this subject of joy. His life reflected a pronounced presence of happiness and contentment.

How are you doing with joy? Some of us in this room justify our moodiness with self-pity saying, “Well, you asked me on the wrong week. You don’t want to know what kind of pressure I’m under. You couldn’t comprehend what kind of responsibility I have. You can’t fathom how many people are pulling for my time.”

I can tell you this, friend: there is no person in this room that has more pressure than Paul had. Every single day, he expected to be flogged. And he was ready to die in peace. It was often that he was bombarded with critics and hateful opponents. Jail cells were his common hotel, beatings were becoming the broken record cycle of his life. And he says to the Corinthians through all this adversity, I am…”sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” Sorrowful yet always rejoicing! Can you say that?

So it wasn’t that Paul had been given a gravy train, an easy way. It wasn’t that Paul was born with a particular predisposition to smile and grin. Paul was the most surrendered, soldout Christian in history and his full trust in the sovereignty of God was what allowed him to shine like a star among people. We have a lot to learn from Paul.

Today, I have turned your attention to Philippians 2, where Paul provides us with the most daunting challenge of our lives. My friends, I can tell you: what I am about to read
is not possible without a true salvation experience, without the thick presence of an invited Holy Spirit. This command that I am about to read cannot be carried through by sheer will power. This is not for lightweights, nor is it for casual Christians. But those of us who heed this command, and follow Paul’s example, will have a glow about us. If we can do this, we will shine like stars in a world of darkness.

Phil. 2:14-16.

Before we unpack Paul’s principle, it’s important that we consider the context. Look back up with me at 2:5 and you see that Paul is now addressing the proper attitude of the saved person. “Your attitude should be…”

Paul mentions humility as the hallmark of Christ. Jesus humbled himself, and because he humiliated himself on a cross, we should not think twice about behaving differently.

V. 12-13 are very important…

Do not misunderstand! Paul is not pushing salvation by works when he says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Not at all! Paul is not selling salvation by works, he is commending “Salvation THAT works.” We should work out what God has worked in. Show outwardly what God has done inwardly.

Because of the bizarre thing that has happened to your soul, re-birth, you should behave in a bizarre way. You should shine like a star in a world that has faded to black.

And how does Paul suggest that you do that? What does Paul commend to us as our new way of life? What’s the game plan?

V.14…Do everything without complaining or arguing...

I find it interesting that he says, “Do everything.” He doesn’t tell us what to do—because all of us are guided by God to perform different roles and services. He does not prescribe here a schedule or a set of activities to fill the day. No, it is not activity that speak to, but attitude. In whatever you do, watch your attitude. And the best way to spot a devilish disposition is the activity of whining and complaining.

Do you realize how prevalent the practice of complaining is today? It is a way of life for most people. You name it, we complain about it.

• My flight has been cancelled.
• The insurance company would not consider my claim.
• They are raising the price of stamps again!
• "My knees hurt, my back hurts. My allergies are acting up. I have a headache. My cholesterol is too high. I'm exhausted. My heart beats irregularly. My kidneys don't work right. My little toe is infected."
• "My students don’t turn in their work on time."
• "My boss is bossy."
• My employees are ungrateful." 
• After everything I did for my kids, they don't come home for holidays."
• "I'm fifty, and my parents are still trying to run my life."
• "This person talks too loud." "That person talks to soft. I can’t hear what she’s saying!"

On and on it goes. It is a flesh-feeding exercise, addictive in nature. The more we complain, the more we want to complain.

And Paul wants you to know that God is not indifferent to our grumbling. Moses endured the complaints of Israel and God nearly dug their graves. God didn’t say, “I know, I know. These are hard times out here in the wilderness. The water is in short supply.” No, he held them accountable for their attitude in the midst of adversity. Even though they were going through challenging times in wilderness travel, God did not dismiss their awful attitudes. And do you know that God does not dismiss yours either.

So what’s the big deal? You ask. Pastor, what is the big deal with complaining? Is this really worthy of a full sermon? Aren’t we making mountains out of molehills? No, God hates grumbling and here is why. When we complain, we are telling people that while God is sovereign over all things, he is not so good in my situation. In fact, if He would just give me control, I could improve upon His plans. Complaining at its core is an expression of pride. And God opposes pride.

We have been talking about the Holy Spirit as of late. If you want to see the presence of the Holy Spirit run out the door like a startled rabbit? Just start protesting your life.

In high school, students take on certain subjects for as sustained period of time. For one full year, they follow the timeline of American History or the angles of Geometry or properties of Physical Science. Here’s a question: what if 40 students followed you around for a year? You are the subject. What would they learn about the subject? What would they observe as they studied you?

Are you a happy Christian? Would those pupils receive lessons on the consistently joyful life? Do you know that you already have students? The people who comprise your inner circle. They are studying you.

What are you like to live with? Would your kids say, “I have a happy dad, I have a happy mom.” What are you like to work with as your secretary observes your everyday under pressure? Are you, not flawlessly, but consistently joyful.” As people interact with you casually, do they see you smiling, laughing, greeting your brother with a kind word? Or do you seem irritated, burdened, worried and hurried?

Paul was the happiest Christian in the room, and yet, he was also the one with the greatest stress and responsibility. So we must not excuse our attitude on the basis of the
assignment. People in worse situations than yours have learned the secret of contentment.

In a sermon on the subject of Joy, C.J. Mahaney quotes a commentary of Job. Listen:

Why is it that men fret so when God sends them things entirely contrary to their desires? ... they do not acknowledge that God does everything by reason that He has just cause. As soon as God does not send what we have desired, we dispute against him, we bring suit... From what spirit is this pronounced? From a poisoned heart, as if we said, “Things should have been otherwise, I see no reason for this.”

My friends, I say this as one who is in the battle with you. If we do not wage war on complaining, we will be vulnerable to a growing cancer of a critical spirit. Every day presents a new opportunity to say to God, “I see no reason for this.”

A few weeks ago, I was speaking at a conference. I was backstage, preparing to walk onto the platform for a waiting audience. It was the first of three messages and I intended to win their attention for the remainder of the weekend with a sizzling first sermon. As I was 5 minutes away from my first words, I received what one might call, “hiccups.” I began to hiccup again. This had been happening off and on all day long but I was certain in the afternoon that God would remove this ailment before I spoke on His behalf.

I kid you not, 2 minutes before my mic goes on, I am backstage in the men’s restroom performing jumping jacks and sit ups. I didn’t know what else to do. And when that didn’t work, I became irritated. I didn’t voice it, but I thought it, “God in heaven, I see no reason for this!”

I worked 2 full days on this message, I’m sure you are aware. Serving you in this, and I am going to be remembered as that guy who held his breath for his first five minutes in the pulpit. I protested.

Thankfully, my wonderful wife knew that this was happening and she was praying for me and 5 seconds before I started, the hiccups ceased. The prayer of a righteous woman is powerful and effective.

But I have to tell you, the temptations to say to God, “I see no reason for this.” They are everywhere. You will go home today, and read the unopened mail from yesterday, and you will say, “I see no reason for this.” You will check your email and you will learn that your inbox is full and has rejected several days of messages and you will be tempted to say, “I see no reason for this.” A family member will pitch a fit about the holiday plans and you will conclude, “I see no reason for this.”

The Bible says that it is never acceptable to complain to God because he is allowing something that you see no reason for. What if God became fed up with my protests and said, “I see no reason for YOU.” That would not be good.
So here is the application today. How do we kill the sin of complaining? And how do we cultivate the growth of joy?

We follow Paul’s example. Paul assigned a high priority to gratitude. The ground of his joy was in God’s strong arm and good work. Look back with me again at chapter 1. V.3…I thank my God every time I remember you….he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion…

Paul was committed to celebrating where God was at work. The evidence of His provision and his care. This church in Philippi, it was a solid church, but it was not without its problems. There was apparently a lot of selfish ambition in the church and rivalry that was growing. There were two prominent women that Paul mentions at the very end of the letter that could not agree and were kicking up dust. All was not well in Philippi, and yet, Paul made it a priority in this letter to point out God’s activity. He assigned a high priority to being grateful to God and in trusting in Him.

So I want to give you, today, a most difficult homework assignment that I have also begun this week.

How To Cultivate Joy Through Gratefulness

1. Take an honest look in the mirror.

Paul said to Timothy: *Keep a close watch on yourself… 1 Tim. 4:16*

To encounter Paul was to encounter gratitude. What is it like to encounter you? Evaluate yourself, but do not restrict the evaluation of yourself to yourself. Ask your spouse this question, “Honey, sweet pea, my darling (whatever your term of endearment is), if you knew that I would not react with an angry outburst, how would you respond to this question: “What is it like to live with me? Am I joyful? Am I pleasant? Am I grateful?

If your children are old enough to make sound judgment, why don’t you ask them, “As you study your dad, what do you see? Is Dad a happy dad?

Ask a few trust colleagues at work, “Am I a person that you would describe as joyful? Do you think I complain a lot?”

Be humble, like Jesus, and invite others into this conversation. Keep a close watch on your life….

2. Thank God every day for grace.

Don’t ever get over the Gospel! The apostle Paul never got over the Good News—that God had wiped his record clean. He considered himself the chief of sinners—the worst sinner on the face of the earth. Well, that couldn’t have been literally true. Surely, he knew that others had murdered thousands and committed far more heinous crimes than
he. And yet, Paul was always familiar with his sins and never forgot how much he had been forgiven. This brought perspective when he was in prison or when he was publicly shamed. God had already handled his biggest problem so his earthly burdens seemed small. He wrote to the Ephesians:

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,* 5 *made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* Eph. 2:5

You should remind yourself every day that once you were lost and now you are found. The mercy of God has made you alive forever. What a pointless life you would live if you had no hope beyond the grave.

3. Point out the work of God that you see in others.
   a. The Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23)
   b. The Gifts of the Spirit (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28; Eph. 4:11)

These two lists comprise the manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Familiarize yourself with these lists and start attaching names to these things.

I would encourage you to take Gal. 5:22-23 and make a list on a piece of paper. And start working your way down that list:

- Love, who do you know that’s loving? You should tell them what you see?
- Joy, who do know that’s joyful? You should point that out in them?
- Peace? Who do you know that seems to live with complete calm?
- Patience? Are you impatient? Are you easily irritated? Who do you know that you will you were more like in this regard? Tell that person how much you appreciate this quality in them.

The fruit of the Spirit are the manifestations of God—the evidence of God’s presence in a person’s life. It is a privilege to discern these things in others and to draw their attention to the work of God.

The list of the gifts of the Spirit is equally helpful. Take this passage:

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.* Romans 12: 6-8

Who do you know that loves to serve? Tell them how much you are challenged by that? Who is a great teacher? Who is an encourager? Who has leadership skills? Who is high on mercy?
What’s the point of this exercise, you ask? It seems a little time consuming. Here is the point? When we assign thankfulness a high priority, as Paul did, we begin to see the world from a different perspective. We begin to cultivate joy.

We kill the complaining spirit, which is never satisfied. And we become active in our pursuit of holiness.

I want you to look at one more verse in Phil. 4:4-9.

I believe that right there is Paul’s secret to contentment. He chose to be thankful, he chose to dwell on the grace of God that He saw in others.