

FOR CHRONIC COMPLAINERS

In listing deadly sins – which the Christians in Corinth were to avoid – the Apostle Paul includes along with idolatry and fornication and blasphemy (all which one might expect on such a list) – a fourth deadly sin which comes rather as a shock (especially in such evil company), namely the sin of complaining. Complaining? A deadly evil? Whoever heard of such a thing. Damn the weather, damn taxes, damn the food, damn the administration, the church, the system – anything at all. And I very sincerely hope under God we're always free to speak our piece. The right to oppose is, I suppose, one of the basic human freedoms.

And besides – to damn is human. Why the bad old human race takes you in with a bear hug when you complain. For example, if you are lonely at the airport – you can strike up a most agreeable conversation with most anyone – a total stranger just by letting your opening gambit be a complaint about the “unseasonable weather,” “the uncertainty of flight schedules,” or some gripe about politics. The other person will immediately take you as a friend, but just you try to start a conversation with a stranger on a saving note, let your opening remark be a blessing – that you are grateful for the challenge of the world situation, that you yourself have never felt better in your entire life, or that your firm showed a fine profit in the last quarter and you think the government is just great – start out that way and more times than not that stranger will think you're the strange one, that you're probably a nut of some sort, a fanatic probably dangerous, a hijacker – and he'll back off – before you can get around to telling him you're only kidding – that you really think the world's in a mess and you have trouble thinking of even ten things that are okay. Yes, to damn is to be acceptably human – to bless is? Oh, somehow oddly divine.

Besides, like Job, you may have every right to complain against God, nature, and your neighbor – a right to wail. And admittedly there is healing therapy in the externalization (the vocalization, the enactment) of our many griefs (so that it does your soul good sometimes to complain – to yell and weep and throw things around and get it out of your system. “I will not keep quiet,” said Job, and more power to him. Nonetheless, to become a chronic complainer – especially one without a cause – without sensible reason – a full-time whiner with no real excuse – to complaining not to explain what your situation is (and that's a legitimate reason – sometimes you have to say, “Look I'm not complaining – I'm just explaining. I can't do thus and so and for these reasons but I'll do this for you instead.”) or to complain not to work any constructive

change in things (which is another legitimate complaint also. Look “let’s do this a better way.”) – to complain not to explain, not to work any change – but to complain just to be contrary, just for the heck of it, just because you’re in the habit of it and can’t, won’t and don’t stop it – why, that’s a sin – as Paul says – indeed, say he, it is the chief weapon of the “destroyer” – “the Satan.” Chronic griping like such a flyspeck of a sin such a little white fault but it isn’t. It’s the devil’s own favorite – his opening wedge. For complainers without a cause and without constructive intent create a living hell all around them. More marriages are destroyed by O.L.C. than by any of the other deadly sins Paul lists. (Know what O.L.C. is? “One Long Complaint”) (Nag, nag, nag). It will separate you from your husband, your wife, your lover, your family, but also from your neighbors – (“O my word!”, let’s get away from here, here comes old whatshisname!) – and in a strong way it will also separate you from yourself too, for constant complaining is what our psychiatrist friends call a “transfer” – for those who have ears to hear – its an unwitting confession – its that something is going wrong with the complainer) We are projecting our dissatisfaction with ourselves onto the world at large (basically since I’m not ok, I’ll say you’re not! “Judge not,” said Jesus, “for with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged.” Even Jesus said – “Who made me a judge or a director over you?” And if Christ did not set himself up as God’s district attorney to prosecute everyone in sight – neither should we assume such a role. It doesn’t fit us. It would be more becoming to us to ask “am I myself part of the problem? or part of the answer? Nine chances out of ten, we are part of the very problem we grumble the most about. It’s time we started being part of the answer instead of being part of the problem.

So let’s check up – now – before we crack up later – on the balance between your enthusiasm and your irritations –if more things gall you than make you glad – if you have more to make you grumble than to make you grateful – then you’re in trouble buddy, heading toward mental and spiritual bankruptcy. And when we are a part of the answer, we don’t grumble, we are too busy.

Come now, let’s stop magnifying our miseries – and minimizing our joys. Jeremy Taylor – three centuries ago – said he couldn’t understand a Christian who was “In love with his sorrow and peevishness” – one who actually “chooses said he, to sit down on his little handful of thorns.”

Our Lord himself was never “in love with his sorrows and peevishness” – True, he had none of the things usually associated with happiness – no house, wife, child, guilt-edges securities, but he had a thankful heart and that made him invincible, incomparable. On the eve of his death – he talked about the joy life had been to him, that he was ok, and that he hoped his disciples would share this joy in full measure that they would be okay also.

What a contrast Christ presented to Tiberus who was his Caesar but not his emperor – Pliny described Tiberius as “the complainingest of men” – yet he had great ability, was a skilled statesman and the world’s richest man. And yet, and yet, and yet not all his prestige and properties could make him a happy fellow.

For happiness depends – not on your position – but on your disposition – not on where you are – but what you are.

The prodigal son – complaining about everything at home – thought if he could just get away everything would be okay. There would be nothing to grumble about – people would be different if he could work in a different place – everything would go his way. He soon found out, however, that the trouble was not so much in his place or his parents as in himself.

Many of us are like that. We think we’d be O.K. if we lived in a different city, a new neighborhood, a better climate. If only we could move to Omaha or Oregon, or have a little place in the mountains – or on the coast – or get farther away from our relatives.

But it seldom works – Socrates was asked why Alcibiades – one of the riches and most gifted of the Greeks – was never happy. Socrates’ answer was, “Because wherever Alcibiades goes he takes himself with him.”

If, therefore – instead of foolishly “sitting on our little handful of thorns” - we could learned with St. Paul to “give thanks always for all things unto God,” life would begin at once – even in the worst places – to look up – and we could begin to live – the way God intends for us.