

Sermon Given by

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Philippians 2:14-30 - "Shining like stars"

Boss ... *Yes, Tommy?* He's singing again! *Who?* That old chap, the one who worships a crucified man. *Just ignore him Tommy. You know they get more delusional the longer they stay in prison.* Well, I thought that at first, sir, but now I'm not so sure. He's a nice guy, you know, asks after the wife and kids, says "thank you" every time we bring him food, really cares about his friends, always praying for them ... and me ... and you. That's not delusional is it, sir? *Hang on! Did you say he says "thank you"... for the food you give him? That muck?* Yeah he does. I mean, I'm sure he's had better, but he doesn't seem to care! He reckons he's got everything he needs. *What are you talking about? He doesn't have anything.* That's not what he thinks, sir. He tells me he's the happiest man alive ... and he says he doesn't even mind if he dies ... he says he's actually looking forward to it. *Well, we all say things like that sometimes, don't we Tommy? It's just we don't really mean it.* Yeah, but he does mean it, sir. He's really excited about catching up with this Lord Jesus, fella. And I've gotta say, the more time I spend with him, the more I think he might be telling the truth. I reckon their just might be something to this Jesus chap ...

It's a great joy to look at Paul's letter to the Philippians with you today. Just after I graduated from university I spent two years working in a refugee school in Thailand, among a group of people called the Karen, from Burma. The Karen Christians were remarkable. I've never heard anyone in this country praise God like they do ... ten of them would probably outsing 100 of us. And I remember one of the first Bible studies I did with some of my students there, it was on Paul's letter to the Philippians ... and they loved it. Unlike us, most of them could fit their life's possessions into a cardboard box. Most of them had spent their lives living as what they call IDPs: "internally displaced people" living in temporary villages or long term refugee camps, having no rights and no prospects. And so they could really identify with the prisoner, Paul, who wrote this letter. And they were really inspired by the way he responded to his imprisonment. How did he respond? In one word: Joy, joy, joy ... all the way through the letter. We've already seen that on 1:15 ...

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel ... (so don't worry about me) ... as a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ ... (I'm having a great time witnessing to Jesus in this place) ... Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly ... (Look at what God's doing through this) ... (And yes I know) that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry ... But (in the end) what does it matter? ... Christ is preached ... because of this I rejoice ... Yes, and I will continue to rejoice ...

And we get it again in today's passage, 2:17: But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith ... (even if I'm completely spent, even if I die doing this) ... I am glad and rejoice with all of you ... so you too should be glad and rejoice with me ... (then he goes on) ... I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you

soon ... (why?) ... so that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you ... (I like rejoicing ... I want some good news from you ... so I can rejoice some more!). We'll see it next week in chapter 3v1: "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!" And then later, in chapter 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" To a large extent, that's what this letter is about: learning how to rejoice, how to find joy, how to help others find joy. If you can just catch Paul's mindset, get on this wavelength as he writes this letter, you'll discover joy ... joy that doesn't get stamped out by difficult circumstances, like imprisonment, financial hardship, unemployment, exam pressure, feeling lonely – which can be especially tough on Valentine's Day.

If you can catch Paul's mindset, or better, the mindset of Jesus Christ that Paul was imitating – 2:5 "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" – if you can get on this wavelength, you'll discover joy that sustains you in those tough times ... joy that's different from the fleeting happiness of being popular or successful or beautiful or rich; joy that you just can't find in the things of this world; joy that makes other people realise you've got something they don't ... joy that makes people sit up and wonder if there might just be something different about being a Christian ... like Tommy did. (By the way, there is some reason to think Tommy might have really existed. At the end of the letter Paul writes, 4:22: "All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household." With a nudge and a wink, Paul is telling the Philippians that some of the emperor's servants and soldiers are becoming Christians. These are tough circumstances, but there's a reason why Paul's there. God's at work.

So, with that context in mind, we're going to focus on one challenge that comes out of today's passage ... it's a command, nestled in the first few verses, that has everything to do with this life of joy Paul is presenting to us. And that challenge comes in 2:14: "Do everything without complaining or arguing ..." Do everything without complaining or arguing. The great London newspaper – that is the Metro – recently published an article on the top 50 British traits. Here are the top 10:

1. Talking about the weather
2. Queuing
3. Sarcasm
4. Watching soaps
5. Getting drunk
6. Loving bargains
7. Curtain twitching
8. Stiff upper lip
9. A love of all television
10. Moaning

A few other favourites of mine: Enjoying other people's misfortune; Not saying what we mean; Achieving against all odds; Wanting our sports teams to fail!

But, it didn't surprise me to see that many of the top 50 British traits were variants on complaining and arguing. Complaining and arguing come so naturally, don't they. It's been a tough week for me preparing this sermon, because it's made me realise how much I grumble: the rain, the cold, the council, my workload, all the responsibilities I've got to juggle. It's so easy, when there's something I don't like, or something that inconveniences me, to

grumble. And I reckon when you get married, it becomes worse, because now you've got someone to share the whole of your life with ... someone to offload all your complaints and grumbles on to. How often does the innocent question, "Hello darling, how was your day?" open the floodgates of grumbling!

Teenagers so easily moan about how unfair things are, arguing with their parents. But if we get into those habits, we don't stop doing it when we become adults. Adults are the same, probably worse! Work places are full of grumbling, aren't they. Before coming here I taught in a sixth-form college, and I was amazed at how much people grumbled. Break times were the worst. The students went to the courtyard and complained about the teachers. The teachers went to the staff room and grumbled about the students and the senior staff. Sometimes I just wouldn't go to the staff room at break-time cos it was so depressing! I'm sure it's the same in a lot of work places. Young or old, there's always something to complain about.

But I've got a question: How many people do you know who are both full of joy and grumble a lot? How many people are there whose lives are characterised by joy and contentment and thankfulness, that spend a lot of time arguing and complaining? None! And I'm sure that's part of the reason why Paul writes this command. At first I thought this command was a negative: thou shalt not. But if we look carefully at what Paul says, it's actually a positive: "Do everything ... without complaining or arguing". It's got a liberating sense to it. The Philippian church was getting dragged down into internal squabbles and disunity and selfishness, and they were losing sight of the joy and freedom that they were supposed to be walking. Paul writes this to liberate them. Paul is saying that, in your new lives in Christ, it is now possible to do everything – to live your whole lives – without complaining or arguing.

Let's consider a few reasons why ...

There is so much to thank God for

Our OT reading is one of the strangest and saddest passages in the Bible. (Keep one finger in Philippians and turn back to Exodus 15). Israel has just been delivered from Egypt in the most amazing way. God has just saved them from slavery and Pharaoh's armies. God has heard their cries, and answered their prayers, and destroyed their enemies. God has saved them. He has done for them what they'd been praying for their whole lives. But as soon as they hit the first bit of trouble, can't find any water, they start grumbling. And a little while later, no food ... it says "the whole community grumbled". And then one of the saddest verses in the whole Bible, Exodus 16:3: "The Israelites said, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt'".

Israel had just seen God's amazing salvation. God had just displayed his love for them in such an amazing way. But in no time at all they forget what he has done and start grumbling. Surely, when they'd just seen God work in such power, they'd trust God to provide for all their future needs. But, sadly, human nature doesn't work like that. Our nature is to forget God and his grace so easily. And when we do forget Him, we grumble.

Paul may well have had Exodus in mind when he wrote today's passage. 2:12: "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" ... how? ... v.14: "Do everything without complaining or arguing." Just as Israel needed to work out their salvation without grumbling or complaining or arguing with Moses at every step, you and I need to work out our salvation

in Christ ... doing everything without complaining and arguing all the time, because we've got so much to thank God for. Let me remind you of some of things that your salvation means:

2:6, Jesus Christ, in very nature God, left the heights of glory and became flesh to save you. He died a brutal and humiliating death for your sins, and he was raised from the dead, and (2:9) God exalted him, your Saviour, to the highest place. And in Colossians 3 Paul says Jesus is there at the right hand of God and you're there with Him!

"You have been raised with Christ ... and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, and – if you willingly bow the knee to him as your Lord – your life is now hidden with him. Your life, your destiny, your eternity, is now inseparably joined to his life, his destiny, his eternity. He has saved you by the power of his resurrection, by the authority he alone has as he reigns at the right hand of God the Father, your Father. When he returns on the day of judgement, you will appear with him in glory. That is the Christian hope. That's the confidence that we live with. God saved Israel from wretched slavery for the Promised Land. God has saved you from wretched slavery (to sin and its misery and its consequences, slavery to seeking fulfilment in the rubbish that this world has to offer) ... for the promised land (eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth filled with the glory of God Himself).

That's the stuff Paul had his sights set on. And Hebrews 12 tells us that Jesus endured the cross because of the "joy set before Him". In the light of that hope and that future joy, what is there to grumble about? We can do everything without complaining or arguing if we remember there is so much to thank God for. I experienced this a few weeks ago. I was really grumpy. I felt that Kylie, my long-suffering wife, had done something that inconvenienced me. She hadn't really, but I was being self-absorbed and grumpy. And so I was walking along, grumbling to myself, feeling sorry for myself and my inconvenience ... but eventually I realised that my grumbling was leaving a bad taste in my mouth. It wasn't liberating me in any way. It was just making me feel worse. And then, for some reason, I remembered a verse from Philippians 4, that talks about always bringing your prayers and concerns to God, "with thanksgiving". And I thought that this was maybe God prompting me to pray to Him, and think of things to thank Him for. And so I had a go. I started to thank God for all his grace to me ... and then I started thanking Him for all the ways that he blesses me through Kylie ... and I started to feel so much better, I got some joy! And when I got home, I apologised to Kylie for being grumpy ... and she was lovely ... and I think God was showing me that grumbling is out of place, when there's so much to thank Him for. When you remember all that God's done for you, grumbling gets replaced by something so much better!

Second reason why we can do everything without grumbling or complaining ...

God gives us the power to change

God doesn't think we can live this new way in our own strength. First Paul says 2:13: "God works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Then, and only then, he says, "Do everything without complaining or arguing." God gives you and me the power to change. The power to be set free from a life where we can't not grumble. God is working in you. The Greek behind verse 13 has a continuous sense. Not God works in you

occasionally. God is working in you. God will keep working in you. The word “energohn” is the one we get “energy” from. “God is energising you” wouldn’t be a bad paraphrase. God doesn’t think you can break out of the pattern of grumbling and complaining and arguing by yourself. God’s giving you the power to change.

We’ll all need to pray about this. But if you’re listening to this and thinking, “Grumbling is a particularly struggle for me. I’m constantly getting dragged down into joyless moaning and complaining”, please take the opportunity to be prayed for in the side chapel after the service. Sometimes it really helps to let someone else pray for you. And asking someone else to pray for you can be a way of saying to God, “I’m serious about this. I really want to change.”

And third reason ...

You will shine like stars in a messed-up world

2:14: “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.”

It’s easy to link the “shining like stars” bit to “holding out the word of life”. But it’s got just as much to do with what comes before: “Do everything without complaining and arguing”. If people are going to realise that we’re holding out the word of life to them, we can’t be grumblers! Grumblers don’t hold out good things to other people, they just offload their problems. But people who don’t grumble and complain and argue stand out a mile in this culture.

My old vicar, Alex, is in his 60s, and he is one of the most joyful people I know. And he used to say that as he gets older, it’s an increasing temptation to be a grumpy old man. He thinks that that is one of the big struggles for Christians as they get older ... to grumble about things. But he fought against this temptation, and prayed against it, and as a result he shines like a star as he holds out the word of life. People realise that there’s something different about this old man ... something wonderful.

And that was one of the remarkable things about many of the Christians among my students in Thailand. Though they had so little, and had every reason to complain, they were set apart from the rest because they replaced grumbling with thanksgiving. They loved praising God and getting to know the Bible better ... because it helped them grasp how much God loves them. It helped set them free from grumbling and complaining and arguing. They shone like stars ... and the other students noticed ... and some of them wanted to know why they were different.

So as we draw to a close. I hope you’re inspired by Paul’s joy in tough circumstances ... and I hope you see why this command, this positive command, to “Do everything ... without complaining and arguing” is an integral part of this joyful mindset ... of the life of someone who, genuinely, can rejoice always. It doesn’t mean that, in tough times, we should just grit our teeth and bear it. The psalms make it clear that we should give all our anxieties and pains and fears and frustrations up to God in prayer. Psalm 142:2 says, “I pour out my complaint before (God); before him I tell my trouble.”

But Paul is talking about the grumbling and complaining and arguing that takes God out of the equation. Don't be like Israel who, when they hit problems, grumbled because they had forgotten the power and the love of God. This is an attitude that has no place in the life of people who know God's salvation in Jesus Christ. When you know Christ, your world is turned upside down ... you're set free from the enslaving patterns of this world ... it becomes possible to do everything without complaining and arguing. Why? Because there is so much to thank God for. Because God is working in you, giving you the power to change. And because, in doing so, you will shine like stars in a messed up world as you hold out the word of life.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)