

On Jawboning

14 Do everything without complaining or arguing 15 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. (Philippians 2:14-15)

For years, my employer in Rochester, New York maintained the quaint custom of an editorial banquet. It was at an upscale venue and always a premier event. Management did not cut corners. They meant to express appreciation, and they did it with class. Nevertheless, year in and year out, the day after feedback was unendingly negative. The shrimp were too small, the wine list too short, the beef Wellington was not tender. One year, break time in the editorial cafeteria found one of our contemporaries holding forth in a particularly vehement jawboning session. "Can you believe it," he said, "even the potato soup was cold." That crossed the line for a friend of mine. He retorted, "That was vichyssoise, Frank. It's a delicacy and it is supposed to be served chilled."

Lest I appear too pious, the times are legend that I have had a complaining spirit, at least in the secret counsels of my heart. Yada, yada, about this or that. The text quoted above speaks to this spirit. Paul instructs us to do all things without complaining or arguing.

The words the apostle uses to describe this prohibition are interesting. Complaining (*gongusmon*) means to speak in a low tone. It is a whispering, grumbling spirit, the kind of sidebar jawboning so common in every organization. It reflects a critical spirit that is not constructive or forthright. Take the issue complained of away, and it will find another soon enough. Arguing (*dialogismon*) refers to inward reasoning that doubts and disputes. This is the line of questioning that has "an attitude". The questioning is not born of a genuine desire to know something, but to state an implicit challenge in an undercutting tone.

Paul goes on to clarify the importance of this in verse 15. The verse is structured as the inverse of Deuteronomy 32:5. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses is singing God's praises and reviewing the Lord's dealings with His people for the generation about to enter the Promised Land. The great lawgiver speaks in summation in 32:5 when he says: "They have acted corruptly toward Him; to their shame they are no longer His children, but a warped and crooked generation." That generation's fathers had validated that assessment repeatedly. They had often complained (ten times in a little over a year—God counted (Numbers 14:22)) amid God's great provision for them in the desert. As they rejected the counsel of Caleb and Joshua and turned away at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13-14), the Lord informed them "I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites" (Num. 14:27) and promised "not one of the men who saw my glory and the marvelous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert and who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers" (Num. 14:22-23).

To say that this is sobering reminder that God dislikes a grumbling, and contentious spirit would be an understatement. That entire cantankerous generation perished in the wilderness! God is exhorting us not to follow their bad example but to adopt a completely different spirit, one that leads to our sanctification. Grumbling, complaining, and undercutting reasoning, the *modus operandi* of the wilderness generation and of this crooked and depraved world, is not to be ours. By God's grace, we are to show forth a decidedly different demeanor.

So, what is the upshot for us? Is this text a no problems mantra? When it comes to the Lord's work, are we to forever play the role of Sergeant Schultz in a spiritual version of Hogan's Heroes, who predictably and invariably "sees nothing" and "hears nothing" amid problems and issues aplenty? No, the spirit prohibited is a critical spirit looking for something to complain about. It does not address problems constructively, it does not take an issue and any suggested resolution to the proper sources, and it does not want to be part of a solution, especially if effort is required. The prohibition targets harmful criticism that undermines an organization, group, or individual.

A complaining and grumbling spirit is one of the enemy's subtle traps. Especially when we are weary of regular laborious tasks, of waiting for things to happen, of situations at work or at home that never seem to resolve themselves, of testy relationships, or of an overload of activities in an already over-busy holiday season. I am sure you can supply other details that try your own inner disposition. This text reminds us not to go down that path. Tangible solutions to problems ought to frame the issue concisely, be brought respectfully to the proper people, and be suggested, not demanded. We are to conduct ourselves in a manner that places us before the presence of God and within the influence of the Spirit, allowing his grace to transform us into what the apostle eloquently describes as "stars shining in the universe."