

Rethinking Your Influence

A Study of Philippians 2:14-18

Characteristic of Completeness: Relationship with the World

Big Idea: Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; don't waste it with grumbling and disputing.

Related Scriptures: Exodus 15:22-25; 16:1-8; 17:1-7;

Numbers 11:1-6; 14:1-4, 26-27; 16:41-17:10; 20:2-3; 21:4-5;

Matthew 5:14-16; Romans 12:18; Ephesians 5:8; 2 Timothy 2:15-17;

Hebrews 4:12; James 5:9; 1 Peter 2:12; 4:9

Introduction:

- A. We've been studying our way through the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. In ► Philippians 2:12, Paul issues a command that makes me squirm. He says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:12 . . . work out your salvation with fear and trembling

It's the "fear and trembling" part that's unsettling. If Paul had just said, "with fear," it would be more palatable. The Greek word for "fear" can mean reverence or respect, and that's what it means here.¹ That goes down pretty easy.

But adding the term, "trembling" makes it harder to swallow. The term, "trembling" comes from a Greek word that describes, "trembling [and] shaking, as an outward sign of fear or of being seized with great awe."²

This "fear and trembling" does not seem very nice, so we don't splash it around much; the Christian marketing department says it's bad for business. You'll never see a church named Community Church of Fear and Trembling. It can conjure up an image of a red-faced preacher pointing a threatening finger at you, shouting that God is dangling you over the pit of hell, and He's going to let go if you don't shape up.

But this verse has nothing whatsoever to do with hell. Paul is writing to believers for whom heaven is already guaranteed by virtue of their belief in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Paul is not talking about how to be saved from the penalty of sin in the Day of Judgment; he's talking about how to be saved from the power of sin in daily life. In big theological terms, Paul is not talking about justification; he's talking about sanctification.

This makes the "fear and trembling" a little easier to swallow, but not entirely. How are we believers supposed to "fear and tremble?"

¹ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. "φόβος," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

² Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "τρόμος," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

It is often enlightening to see how the same author uses the same phrase in different parts of the Bible. Paul uses the phrase “fear and trembling” in two other places. When we consider the other uses, we see that Paul adds “trembling” to “fear” as a kind of additive to kick it up a notch. “Fear and trembling” is fear turbocharged. “Fear and trembling” is fear on steroids. And remember, in this case, “fear” means reverence and respect. So, Paul is talking about an extraordinary respect. And in each case, a God-given authority is in view who is to be afforded great respect.

For example, in ► 2 Corinthians 7:15, Paul speaks of how the people in the Corinthian church demonstrated extraordinary respect for Titus. He says,

^{NAU} 2 Corinthians 7:15 . . . you received him [Titus] with fear and trembling.

Also, in ► Ephesians 6:5, Paul says that, in the workplace, Christian employees ought to grant the same kind of extraordinary respect to their superiors. He says,

^{NAU} Ephesians 6:5 . . . be obedient to those who are your masters . . . with fear and trembling . . .

So “fear and trembling” does not picture a person terrified and quivering in a fetal position; it pictures instead extraordinary respect for a God-given authority, including God Himself. But ► what does that look like?

- B. Sometimes it’s good to explain something by thinking about its opposite. What would be the opposite of fear and trembling? And what would be the consequences of a failure to have an attitude of fear and trembling?

These are the questions that Paul addresses in our text for the week. It’s ► Philippians 2:14-18. Here, Paul warns us against the opposite of fear and trembling. And the opposite of fear and trembling may surprise you.

I want to show you from our text that the opposite of “fear and trembling” is “grumbling and disputing.” Moreover, I want to show you that, while an attitude of “fear and trembling” works out our salvation, “grumbling and disputing” actually wastes our salvation.

So ► the big idea of my message is this: Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; don’t waste it with grumbling and disputing. We could shorten it up by simply saying, work it out; don’t waste it away.

- C. Let me read our text one time through. Then I’ll go back and make the case for my big idea.

► ^{NAU} Philippians 2:14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing; ► 15 so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, ► 16 holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. ► 17 But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. ► 18 You too, *I urge you*, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

- D. My message this morning is built around ► four questions relating to this text.
- I. First, ► what is the “grumbling and disputing” of Verse 14?
- A. Looking up the definitions of the original Greek words used is helpful.
1. ► “Grumbling” describes behind-the-scenes complaining or murmuring or whining in a low tone of voice.³ “Grumbling” almost always has a negative connotation in Scripture.
 2. ► “Disputing” can have a positive or negative connotation, depending on the context. Positively, it describes the process of reasoning with another person.⁴ Negatively, as it is used here in our text, it describes arguing, bickering, or quarreling.⁵
- B. Does this mean we are never to disagree with other believers? Are we never to confront those who are clearly out of line?

Other Scriptures tells us that certain disagreements and confrontations are needful. For example, in Galatians 2, Paul tells us that, at one point, he opposed Peter to his face because Peter had become hypocritical about the truth of the gospel in favoring Jews over Gentiles.⁶

So what’s the difference between disputing that’s okay and disputing that’s not? The immediately preceding context helps us. You may recall that Paul has been building a case for being humble toward one another. So we may safely infer that disputing must be constrained by humility. Specifically, we can borrow Paul’s language in Chapter 2 to put some boundaries on disputing.

1. Verse 3 ► suggests that disputing is not to be “from selfishness or empty conceit.”

³ BDAG, s.v. “γογγυσμός.”

⁴ BDAG, s.v. “διαλογισμός.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Galatians 2:11-14.

2. Verse 4 ► suggests that disputing is not to be “merely for your own personal interests.”
 3. Verse 6 suggests ► that disputing is not to be a form of power to be “grasped” or exploited for personal gain at the expense of others.
- C. So the “grumbling and disputing” that Paul forbids involves selfish complaining, whining, and bickering that falls outside the bounds of a humble regard for other people.
- II. That brings us to the ► second question: How can “grumbling and disputing” be the opposite of “fear and trembling”?
- A. First of all, the ideas of “fear and trembling” and “grumbling and disputing” are presented in very close proximity to one another. In fact, many Bible scholars have noted that, in context, an attitude of “grumbling and disputing” stands diametrically opposed to one of “fear and trembling.”⁷
 - B. Furthermore, the language Paul uses points to something that makes the connection quite clear. Let me show you.

In ► Verse 15, Paul refers to . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 2:15 . . . a crooked and perverse generation . . .

You say, “Yeah, so what?”

Well, you may know that Paul was a Jewish scholar. He was an expert in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. A couple of hundred years before Paul’s time, the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language. This Greek translation of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint. The Septuagint quickly became the primary Bible of synagogue worship and Jewish instruction.⁸

You say, “Yeah, so what?”

Well, in Verse 15 of our text, Paul appears to be quoting ► Deuteronomy 32:5 from the Septuagint, where it also describes . . .

^{NAU} Deuteronomy 32:5 . . . a perverse and crooked generation.

⁷ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 291, citing a host of scholars.

⁸ Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek*, s.v. “Septuagint,” (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

In comparing Philippians 2:15 and Deuteronomy 32:5, the words, “perverse” and “crooked” are transposed in this English translation, but they’re perfectly matched in the Greek. Paul is quoting—quoting to make a connection. What’s the connection?

Well, in Deuteronomy, this describes the people of Israel during the time of Moses. Specifically, they had been miraculously saved by God from bondage in Egypt, and they were passing through the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. In a sense, they were “working out their salvation” in the wilderness. And you may know that this wilderness experience was characterized by a great deal of grumbling and disputing among the people in the face of hardship. So they were not working out their salvation with fear and trembling; they were wasting their salvation with grumbling and disputing.

1. After God liberated them through miraculous plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites grumbled for lack of water (Exodus 15:22-25).
2. After God miraculously provided water, the Israelites grumbled for lack of meat (Exodus 16:1-8).
3. After God miraculously provided quail and manna, the Israelites grumbled again for lack of water (Exodus 17:1-7).
4. After God miraculously provided more water and the Law, the Israelites grumbled about the monotony of manna (Numbers 11:1-6).
5. After God miraculously provided more meat and brought them to the brink of the Promised Land, the Israelites grumbled about the dangers within it (Numbers 14:1-4, 26-27).
6. After God miraculously dealt with Korah’s rebellion, the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:41-17:10).
7. After God miraculously caused Aaron’s rod to bud, confirming Aaron’s authority, the Israelites grumbled again against Moses and Aaron for lack of water (Numbers 20:2-3).
8. After God miraculously provided more water and a victory over the Canaanites, the Israelites grumbled again for lack of variety in food (Numbers 21:4-5).

Over and over again, God gave, and His people grumbled.

So, it appears that Paul had in mind this grumbling and disputing of the Israelites as he wrote to the Philippians. And the parallel between the Israelites and the Philippians is instructive.

You see, the Israelites had been saved from their bondage to Egypt, and then the hardships of life in the wilderness brought grumbling and disputing against God and God-given authorities. Similarly, the Philippians had been saved from their bondage to sin, and then the hardships of life in Philippi brought grumbling and disputing against God and God-given authorities in the church.

While the grumbling and disputing of the Israelites was expressed against other believers and particularly leaders, it was ultimately against God, and reflects an absence of fear and trembling. And there's the connection: The grumbling and disputing of the Israelites, and the grumbling and disputing of the Philippians, and the grumbling and disputing of some in the church today reflects an absence of fear and trembling before God and God-given authorities.

- C. You see, there ► is a natural tendency in us that plays into this. When hardship comes or we encounter some obstacle to our personal satisfaction, we're tempted to cast ourselves in the role of victim, and we look for someone else or something else to blame. And we can develop a whiney attitude of selfish entitlement—a pouty, pushy, prideful mind-set that demands its own way—a bitter, woe-is-me outlook that says, "I am being victimized," never considering the possibility that God is trying to refine the impurities from our own hearts through hardship.

1. I've seen it over and over again in business. A guy doesn't get the recognition or the promotion or the pay he wants so he plays the role of the grumbling victim. "The management doesn't know what they're doing." "I've got an idiot for a boss." "My coworkers are threatened by my brilliance so they stabbed me in the back."

There may be some truth peppered into the grumbling, but just once I'd like to hear someone say, "I got fired . . ." or "I got passed over because I'm lazy and incompetent, and it was a real wake-up call for me."

2. I've also seen grumbling and disputing in churches, and I've participated in it myself. Hardship can bring it out.

One of the first times I saw it I think I was maybe 21 years old. Cathy and I were newlyweds living in Tucson with no children yet. We were volunteering as leaders in the youth program at the church where we were married. We worked with high-schoolers.

At the time, a handful of powerful parents in the church began to grumble about the youth pastor with whom we worked closely. It seemed to me that the parents who were grumbling generally had one hardship in common: Their children were not turning out well. Their kids were getting into some

trouble. And it seemed to me that they were blaming the youth pastor for the dysfunction in their own homes.

And so, what did I do? I added to the grumbling. I made an appointment with the governing Elder Board of the church. I was 21 years old. I had been a Christian for only a few years. I was not parent. And there I was standing before the elders with my Bible opened. I nervously read Deuteronomy 6:6-7:

^{NAU} **Deuteronomy 6:6** “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

And then I said it: “This is about parenting. Our youth pastor is being made a scapegoat for your failure to parent your own children.” That went over well.

I’m afraid I was disrespectful of God-given authority. I believe there was some truth mixed in with my grumbling and disputing. There usually is. But my disrespectful attitude was not good.

As for the parents, there was probably some truth mixed in with their grumbling and disputing, too. Some things probably did need to improve in the youth program. But their disrespectful attitude was not good.

- III. Why is grumbling and disputing so bad? Well, in our text, Paul tells us that grumbling and disputing actually wastes our salvation. As Christians, I don’t believe we can lose our eternal salvation, but we can waste it on earth. That brings us to ► the third question: How can “grumbling and disputing” waste our salvation? I find four ways in the text.
- A. First, ► an attitude of grumbling and disputing wastes an opportunity to witness to the world. In ► Verse 15, Paul tells us that the reason we are not to grumble and dispute is . . .

^{NAU} **Philippians 2:15** so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,

If we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we shine as lights in the world, allowing people to see the goodness of God through us. On the other hand, if we grumble and dispute, we waste the opportunity by blending right in with the darkness of the world.

This has to do with our relationship with the world. Indeed, that is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week ► our Relationship with the World.

When I have an attitude of fear and trembling, I am an ambassador. When I cop an attitude of grumbling and disputing, I am an embarrassment.

- B. Second, ► an attitude of grumbling and disputing wastes the investment of godly leaders in you. In ► Verse 16, Paul gives this as another reason why the Philippians shouldn't grumble or dispute. He says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:16 . . . so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

Here, Paul holds out the very real possibility that his investment in the Philippians could be wasted. When Christ returns, it is possible for Paul to discover that his work with the Philippians was in vain. And this depends on whether or not the Philippians continue to cop an attitude of grumbling and disputing.

In ► Verse 17, Paul illustrates the idea using the imagery of sacrifice in the Old Testament. He says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:17 But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all.

In this rather puzzling metaphor, Paul compares the faithful obedience of the Philippians to ► a “sacrifice” offered to God in the midst of a “service” or liturgy. Paul compares ► himself to a drink offering.

In order to make sense of this, we need to know a little something about sacrifices prescribed for the Jewish people in the Old Testament. A well-known “service” involving sacrifice was the Feast of First Fruits in which an offering of the first portion of a harvest—a grain offering—was presented to the Lord. Over the grain offering was poured a drink offering of about two pints of wine, symbolizing joy.⁹

Here's the point I think Paul is trying to make: To the extent that the Philippians obediently offer themselves to the Lord with fear and trembling as a living sacrifice, the drink offering of Paul's life poured over them will produce joy. But, to the extent that the Philippians get caught up in grumbling and disputing and do not offer themselves to the Lord, the drink offering of Paul's life is wasted; it is poured out alone.¹⁰

- C. Third, ► an attitude of grumbling and disputing wastes an opportunity to be rewarded at Christ's return. In ► Verse 16, “the day of Christ” is a probable reference to the time period in which Christ returns for His people and we appear before Him to be judged according to how we worked out our salvation on earth. At stake is the gain or

⁹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), footnote on Leviticus 23:10-14.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 63.

loss of rewards. Paul alludes to this in ► 2 Corinthians 5:10, where he says to believers,

^{NAU} 2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Back in our text, the idea that Paul could run in vain certainly carries with it the idea that the Philippians could waste their salvation and thereby forfeit their reward before Christ. The praise from the Lord, “Well done, good and faithful servant”¹¹ is not some polite, meaningless, throw-away line that every believer will hear. It is reasonable to infer from our text that those who work out their salvation with fear and trembling will hear it; those who waste their salvation with grumbling and disputing will not.

- D. Finally, ► an attitude of grumbling and disputing wastes an opportunity for leaders to experience the joy of your reward. In ► Verse 16 Paul says he wants the Philippians to refrain from grumbling and disputing . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 2:16 . . . so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory . . .

Paul wants to be able to share in the joy of the Philippians’ reward. He wants to be proud of them. It seems that what is true in life today will also be true in the “day of Christ.” Namely, leaders will get to experience the joy of their followers’ reward. Parents will get to experience the joy of their children’s reward. Teachers will get to experience the joy of their students’ reward. Mentors will get to experience the joy of their protégés’ reward. This packs more punch into ► 3 John 4, where the Apostle John says,

^{NAU} 3 John 4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

As I’ve ► studied this text over the past couple of weeks, I’ve realized that the consequences of a chronic attitude of grumbling and disputing are far more serious than I ever thought. When I continue to grumble and dispute, I waste an opportunity to be a light for Christ in this world; I waste the investment of leaders in me; I waste the opportunity for reward when Christ returns; and I waste the opportunity of others to share the joy of my reward. What a waste!

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; don’t waste it with grumbling and disputing. Work it out; don’t waste it away.

- IV. That brings us to the ► final question: How can we avoid “grumbling and disputing”? I see at least two answers in the text.

¹¹ Matthew 25:21, 23.

- A. First, ► we can avoid grumbling and disputing by focusing on application of God’s word to our lives. In ► Verse 16, Paul explains that we shine as lights in the world by . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 2:16 holding fast the word of life . . .

I take the word of life to include the Bible. And holding fast the Bible means living it out. It’s not just picking it up and putting it down; it’s holding it fast.

I find that when I am working to apply the Bible to my life—not just accumulating knowledge, but truly allowing the Holy Spirit to change me—I have neither the time nor the inclination to grumble and dispute.

- B. Second, ► focus on spreading joy, not negativism. In ► Verse 18, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:18 You too, *I urge you*, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

There is an emphasis here on rejoicing together, focusing together on that which is praiseworthy. Paul says in Philippians 4:8,

^{NAU} Philippians 4:8 . . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

What would that look like?

Let’s use our imaginations to go back and peak in on the Israelites in the wilderness. It’s just days after their liberation from Egypt. God had miraculously brought plagues upon Egypt to release the Israelites from bondage. And God had recently parted the Red Sea to save the Israelites from the Egyptian army.

Now there are hundreds of thousands of Israelites traveling in the wilderness, but we’re just going to peak in on one small group gathered around a campfire one night. It’s the Silverberg Life Group.

One person in the group casts a complaint to see if anyone else will bite: “Is anyone else concerned about the lack of water out here?”

Another says, “Yeah, I’m real thirsty. I think we’re all doing to die.”

Another says, “You know, I think there should be some programs in place to get us some water, but I just don’t see Moses stepping up to the plate. We need some fresh leadership.”

Then a few of them raise their fists and begin to chant: “Water to the people. Water to the people. Water to the people. Water to the people, right on.”

Then Barry Silverberg speaks up: “I’m thirsty, too. But in everything we’ve been through, hasn’t God demonstrated that He’s powerful enough to save us? And hasn’t God demonstrated that He knows what’s going on? And hasn’t God demonstrated that He cares for us? I mean, by God’s grace, we were slaves and now we’re free. By God’s grace, He saved us. And Moses is not perfect, but God used him to deliver us. I don’t know what God is doing with the drought. But it seems like sitting around grumbling and disputing is a waste of our salvation. Maybe we ought to thank Him for what He’s done, and ask Him for some water. And maybe ask Him if something in us needs to change. Let’s work out our salvation with fear and trembling and not waste it with grumbling and disputing.”