

What to do when complaining takes hold of you

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Q: I've noticed something about myself. I used to be someone who occasionally complained, but recently I've realized that I am constantly complaining about one thing or another. I seem to be able to find something to be upset about in every situation and with every piece of news I come across. What do I do?

A: This is a very important question. I believe that it is possible to lose your soul over this.

Now, I know that that might sound overly dramatic, but bear with me.

In the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians, he advises Christians to “do everything without grumbling.” This is not to say that every time we complain or grumble we are committing a mortal sin. There are powerfully positive aspects of complaining. First of all, when there are injustices or when evil is being perpetrated, pointing those out is a necessity. Disciples of

Christ must be willing to speak the truth even if the truth is unpopular or inconvenient. Further, there are times when a person might need to express their interior displeasure with something. In normal and healthy human relationships, individuals must sometimes deliver bad news. Sometimes this bad news is as simple as, “I do not like this.” This honesty is actually helpful for the people around us, provided it is delivered in a straightforward and appropriate way.

I was speaking recently with a friend who runs a small chain of stores. He referenced a book he had read about business management. The book is called “Complaint Is a Gift.” I expressed interest in reading it, but after a moment of reflection, I realized that the book’s title was also the book’s thesis, and I understood the value of this perspective. Essentially, when the people you are working with (or living with, or teaching, or leading) come to you with a complaint, they are handing you a gift.

First of all, they are giving you the gift of trust. If a person does not trust you, they will not let you know what is bothering them. (They will, however, tell everyone else but you!) Second, when a person complains, they are directing your attention to something that is wrong. Now, this could be something that actually needs to be fixed. For example, if you were in charge of the work schedule, they might be directing your attention to the fact that you haven’t scheduled anyone to work a certain shift. Their telling you this is a gift.

On the other hand, it is possible that there is nothing objectively wrong that can be solved externally. In this case, the person offering the complaint is revealing something about their interior disposition or about their perspective. Now, their perspective can be uninformed or even wrong, but if they share their perspective, then you will know what is going on with them and have the opportunity to deal with that. Either way, their complaint gives you the gift of knowing something you would not otherwise know if they had not complained.

That being said, not all complaining is productive. Not all complaining is oriented towards being helpful. There can be a point where complaining becomes spiritually deadly.

It begins by narrowing our gaze and our awareness of reality. While we need to see things clearly (we are not supposed to be Pollyannaish in our view of the world!), to only be able to see the negative is to be partly blind. To allow the negative to dominate and define one’s life is to become a slave to the squeaky wheel or to the most negative voice. What is worse, we face the danger of becoming the negative voice. (Again, this is not the same thing as the prophet who has to point out the areas where an individual or a people need to repent.) We might reach the point where we “become a complaint.”

I had this experience a number of years ago. My parents wanted a family photo with all of their kids and in-laws and grandkids. My mom had picked out polo shirts for every family group to wear (she and my dad had one color, my sister and her husband and their kids had another color, and so on). I have two siblings who aren’t married, so the three of us got our

own “single person’s color” polo. It was a color that I would not have normally chosen for myself. So I started joking about it. In an “I’m just kidding” way, I complained about it. And at first, I was genuinely laughing about it. But then something happened. The more I complained (even in a joking way), the more I got cranky about it and the more I continued to genuinely grumble about it. At one point, I even noticed what was happening, and I started telling myself to pull it together, but I couldn’t let go of the complaint. It had a hold on me.

This can be the case with any “small sin,” whether it be resentment, anger, curiosity, gossip, jealousy, or complaining. There may come a point where we want to let go of it and will be unable to because it will have a grip on us.

C.S. Lewis describes this phenomena in his book “The Great Divorce.” He has just witnessed a fantastic meeting between a saint and her now dead husband. The saint is trying to convince the man to let go of his grumbling and complaining and come with her to Heaven, but the man simply cannot let go of his grumbling. In Lewis’ words, the man has “become a grumble.” He writes, “Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others ... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God ‘sending us’ to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud.”

The way out of this self-inflicted Hell is to surrender to Jesus. I found myself powerless to overcome my weakness in complaining. I had to do two things: ask Christ to help me and forgive me and turn to my family and tell them what was happening. I had to tell them that I was sorry that I put myself in a bad mood and that I was grateful that we all had the chance to be together for the day. Sometimes merely acknowledging that we are under the influence of grumbling is enough to break its spell.

Above all else, we turn to God’s grace, asking God to help us see the whole truth of our situation, and giving thanks for the good that is there.