

**JAMES 5:9**  
**“DON’T GRUMBLE AGAINST EACH OTHER”**

Not long ago, a Christian website asked the question, “Do we still need the local church?” Here is part of the response of a woman in her 40s from Georgia:

“It’s sad to say, but my family has recently stopped looking for a fellowship. We have been faithful church attenders and involved believers for 17 years or more. We have been involved in bible studies, community service, and supported church functions. Moving and requiring a biblically rooted, Jesus focused church has settled us in a variety of conservative congregations.

“Not to go into details, (but) my husband says only Christians eat their own. Harsh as that sounds, I have seen some pretty wicked behavior...”

As James writes about real faith and real life, he is still thinking about patience. Last week, we learned that patience is putting our hands to the plow and our eyes to the sky. We do what God calls us to do, and we look to him to provide. We do this as our hearts grow stronger, and as we live in the presence of the Savior who comes now by his Spirit, and who will return one day in judgment and mercy.

But patience is not just a personal issue. It is a relational issue. James knows that when we face struggles that try our patience, those struggles often test our relationships. This is true in all relationships, but James is thinking especially about relationships within the body of Christ. We may not be the only people who eat our own, but we are tempted to eat our own.

One way we do this, is by grumbling about the other people in the body. When we grumble, we are complaining. We are speaking against people. We are turning on each other and eating each other with our words. In the few words before us, James shows us the path to grumbling, and the path from grumbling.

Let’s start with THE PATH TO GRUMBLING.

WHEN DO WE DO IT? When do we tend to grumble?

We might do it all the time. Maybe you know people who have a negative spirit about life and living. Maybe you look at one of those people in the mirror each morning. Nothing is ever good. Or if something is good, there is always something bad with the good. When you are a grumbler, you just can’t seem to keep those thoughts to yourself. Words flow easily, so you have to say what you are thinking, and you grumble and complain all the time.

Is that you? Is that me? Here is how to find out. Ask someone. Ask your spouse. Ask your friends. Ask your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Young people, ask your parents. Ask if when they are with you, they feel as if the glass is always half-empty. Ask if you build their spirit, or burden their spirit. Then listen to the answer - with your ears and your heart.

We might do it all the time, and we might do it when we suffer. Let’s be honest: it is easy to smile when the sun is shining - when the sky is bright and all is well. But we are broken people surrounded by broken people in a broken world. We should be living boldly for Jesus Christ, and maybe that will lead to more struggle and suffering. Now the smiles become forced. Now the joy becomes a chore. Now it is easy to grumble.

They say hard times produce character. That is true. As Paul writes in Romans 5, suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. But before suffering produces character, suffering reveals character. When times are tough, you reveal the contents of your heart and the commitments of your heart - maybe more than you know.

It is said that you can learn a lot about a person by playing golf with that person. It is true, because golf and life are a lot alike. Here you are, in this beautiful place. But then you have to start to hit the ball. You hit it poorly and it dribbles off to the side. Or you hit it well, but it bounces into a bunker anyway. Or you finally get it to the green, and you miss a putt that is shorter than you. Sometimes everything goes right, and you start to think you are getting the hang of this. Then you swing again, and disaster strikes.

Then you react. Maybe you say nothing, but your face is as red as your shirt. Or you curse under your

breath. Or you start to make excuses. Or you throw the club - as if it is the club's fault. Or maybe you yell and scream and throw lots of things. I am reminded of the fellows in Minnesota who started a business where they scuba-dived for golf balls on the bottoms of lakes on golf courses - and how many bags of clubs they found!

Hard times produce character. But they also reveal character. What kind of character is seen in you, in times of trial and trouble? Is that when the grumbling and complaining begins?

You are happy while your income is good, but miserable when money is tight. You are kind when you are healthy, but cruel when you are sick. You are calm if your plans are on target, but irate when the schedule is missed. You are full of praise for God and people when your marriage is strong, but filled with rancor and bitterness when you are not relating so well. You love when people love you for loving Jesus, but you hate when people hate you for loving Jesus.

On the path to grumbling, we might do it all the time, and we might do it when we suffer. So HOW DO WE DO IT? We cannot count all the ways, but let's visit three.

We do it, by blaming. I have a problem, and I blame you for the problem. I know I should not blame God for the problem, but I don't want to blame myself for the problem, so I blame you for the problem. Maybe you have some responsibility, but I want to give you all of the responsibility, so I don't have to take responsibility for myself.

I blame you for my lack of control over my temper. I blame you for the bad reputation our church or business has in the community. I blame you for our financial problems. I blame you for the broken relationships in our family. I blame you for my depression.

We do it, by shifting. This is when I have a problem, and I take out the problem on you. I know I cannot blame the problem on you, but I cannot do anything about the problem, so I have to take out my frustrations on someone, and I choose you. I am like a child. My emotions are fried, and I take them out on the people closest to me.

I am frustrated by the laziness of people at work, so I rail against you for your failures in the home. I wish people would drive better, so I am surly toward you when I arrive. I am sick and tired of the dumb decisions they make in Washington, so I hammer you for the questionable decision you made. I am disappointed by the church, so I am harsh toward my children. I wish my emotional problem would go away, so I dump all of my grumbling emotions on you.

We do it by blaming, by shifting, and by reacting. In his book on marriage, Emerson Eggerich calls this "the crazy cycle." The husband fails to love the wife, so the wife fails to respect the husband. So the husband fails to love the wife again, and the wife fails to respect the husband again. On and on and on it goes.

I suffer. I struggle. I act badly. You respond badly to me. So I respond badly back to you. So you respond badly back to me. Bad actions. Bad reactions. Our grumbling grows greater and greater, while we ride the ride of the crazy cycle.

What is happening here? Why all this blaming, shifting and reacting? It is quite simple: when events turn against us, we turn against each other. When something bad happens to us, something bad happens within us. We often cannot do anything about what has happened to us, so we do what we can do: we turn against the people around us.

Maybe it is in the home. Maybe it is in an extended family. Maybe it is in a friendship or in a workplace. Or maybe it is in the church. When events turn against us, we turn against each other - especially by speaking words of grumbling and complaining against each other.

Author John Maxwell describes what he calls "The Elevator Principle." It is this: "We can lift people up or take them down in our relationships." Just as elevators take people up or down, we take people up or down. The problem is that when we are down, we tend to take others down with us, especially as we speak to them, and about them.

Is that the path you are on this morning? Think over just the last week. Think over the hard moments

and days of the last week. Whom did you blame? To whom did you shift your emotions? How did you react badly, even to the bad reactions of others? How did you follow the path to grumbling?

Maybe that is where you are today. The answer is found in Jesus Christ. Only he is able to forgive your sins and change your heart. Only he can take you from the path to grumbling, to the path from grumbling. Today, he does this through his brother and servant named James. As usual, James pulls no punches as he urges us to THE PATH FROM GRUMBLING.

As James does this, he first forces us to ask, WHAT ARE WE DOING? In other words, when we grumble against each other, what exactly is happening?

We are judging. James writes, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers...” That sounds a lot like his words in chapter 4, when he wrote about speaking against each other and judging each other. As we discussed when we read those words, these are words that:

- \* Caricature. I draw a picture of you with my words that is not accurate or honest.

- \* Criticize. I find only what is wrong with you, and I focus only on what is wrong with you.

- \* Condemn. I begin to wonder where you stand before God, because you do not believe exactly as I do, or live exactly as I do.

I should exhibit and express humility toward you. Instead, I exhibit and express a noxious and obnoxious self-righteousness. I want to feel morally superior to you. I am walking through events that should humble me. Instead, I just want to hammer you. I am judging you.

I caricature you by saying that you are never any help at all. I am judging you. I criticize you by picking on the smallest mistakes you make. I am judging you. I condemn you by wondering how you can even call yourself a Christian, because you are not treating me the way I want to be treated in my struggle and suffering. I am judging you.

We are judging. So we will be judged. “The Judge,” James writes, “is standing at the door!” As he has done already, James reminds us of the judgment of God. As we have seen, this is most likely what we call the “evaluating” judgment of God. There is the “condemning” judgment of God, in which he sends unrepentant sinners to hell as punishment for their sins. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are free of that judgment. But there is still the “evaluating” judgment of God, in which he promises to call his people to account for how they have lived for him.

When we are judging, we will be judged in this way. This is a vivid reminder about Jesus’ care for the way we speak about each other, and to each other. Remember that this entire section is about the second coming of Jesus in his mercy and judgment. That is the next great event in human history. In that moment, our hearts and lives and words will be exposed to the evaluating judgment of God.

That should sober us up and slow us down. When we grumble against each other, we think it is just about us. But it is not. When we grumble in this body, or when we grumble against others in the larger body of Jesus Christ, we are speaking against those for whom Jesus Christ has died. We are not always a pretty bride, but we are the bride of Christ. We should take great care about the way we speak to each other and of each other, for we will be judged for it.

Several years ago, a circus performer named Jayde Hanson was performing his tricks for over a million viewers in England. They watched as he tried to show how many knives he could throw at his girlfriend in 60 seconds without hitting her. Most of the knives missed her, but one grazed her head. She survived, but she decided to let someone else do the knife trick with Jayde.

What will be God’s judgment, upon the knives of my words - even and especially the words I have spoken in times of suffering, and even and especially the words I have spoken about my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ? What about my words, when I said she is nothing but a whiner? What about my words, when I pounced on your every imperfection? What about my words, when I questioned his faith, because of the way he reacted to trouble?

The path from grumbling begins with the humbling understanding of how we judge, and how we will be

judged for the way we speak. But we move farther along the path, when we answer this question: WHAT SHOULD WE DO? Remember: when events turn against us, we tend to turn against each other. So what should we do in those situations? I offer two ideas.

First, we should embrace. We face this trial. We suffer this struggle. Maybe it is because we live for Jesus, or maybe it is just because we live in this broken world. We have to see these trials and struggles as times to draw nearer to God, and to each other.

We want to isolate ourselves, both physically and emotionally. We want to lob grenades at each other from our bunkers. But in Christ, we are called to embrace each other anew.

I am reminded of early last year, when my wife faced major surgery. Some people want lots of people around them as they wait. I wanted to be alone. But one person kindly and gently said, "How about if I come sit with you for just a little while, during my lunch hour?" That happened to be the first hour of the surgery. And I was blessed by that. I wanted to isolate myself in that trial. But I needed to embrace and be embraced. The next time I am in a waiting room, I still don't want a ruckus! But it is good for us to draw near each other, instead of away from each other, in hard times.

We have to be prayerful and purposeful about this. It won't just happen. I have to say, "As we walk through this hard time, how will we find ways to reach toward each other, instead of reaching out against each other?" This should be the culture in this community. This should be the culture in our homes. We do not smother. But we do embrace - with words, with deeds, with whatever will remind us that we do not walk through these trials alone.

You are facing financial problems in your home. Are you embracing each other as husband and wife - especially with words of humility and forgiveness? You are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and it is painful. Are you embracing your adult children - especially with words of thankfulness? Young person, you are hurting because of someone who hates Jesus. Are you seeking fellowship with other young believers? You are living with uncertainty about your future. Are you running from people, or running toward people? You are struggling under the weight of guilt, regret and shame because of your sin. Does anyone know? Can anyone help?

We should embrace. And we should encourage. How can we encourage each other in the hard days of this broken world, as we await the return of Jesus? We want to tear each other down, but instead we should be finding ways to build each other up - so that we may all have courage to stand strong in the midst of the storms which blow our way.

What is encouragement? It is more than "praise talk" - where I tell you that you are good. It is also more than a "pep talk" - where I tell you that everything will be okay. Encouragement is when I enable you to see God's sovereign grace and stand strong in God's sovereign grace, even in the midst of trials and trouble. Encouragement is when I say,

"My young friend, I know you have really blown it, and we are all hurting because of it. But I believe God is able to do a great work in you through this. He can use this evil for good."

"My sister in Jesus, I know this loss is so hard for you. Maybe you have not always reacted well. But I know God is able to give you the strength to carry on, and to grow through this."

"My brother in Christ, I know you hate the hatred you are feeling from your culture and even your family because of your faith. Be strong and courageous. God will see you through this."

"My older friend, I cannot imagine all the hassle and heartache of old age. But God has been faithful to you for so many years. He will not fail you now."

"My fellow believer, I don't know what will happen in your life. But I know that God has you in his hand, and he wants you to honor him and trust him for everything that is ahead."

What will daily characterize the culture of this community, and our lives as believers? Will we blame, shift and react, with all kinds of caricaturing, criticizing and condemning, or will we embrace and encourage each other?

A man named Neil White has written a book about his year in prison in Louisiana - a prison that also housed the last leper colony in the United States. He writes of how the lepers changed him - especially an old woman named Ella. I am not sure if this man knows Jesus, but I was moved by his words as he recalled his plans to return to his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi:

“At some point after I settled in Oxford, I would take Ella’s advice and find a church. Not just any church. A place...where the parishioners were broken and chipped and cracked. A place to go when I needed help. A place to ask forgiveness. A sacred place where people were not consumed with image or money.

“I didn’t know if a church like this existed, but if it did I would go. And I would pray. Not the kind of prayers I used to pray for miracles or money or advancement. I would ask for something more simple. I would pray...that I would never forget.”

We are broken and chipped and cracked. If we forget that we are saved purely by the grace of Jesus, we will grumble against each other for being broken and chipped and cracked. But if we remember how broken and chipped and cracked we are, we will strive to create a community where we embrace and encourage each other, especially in times of trial and trouble.

Grumbling is easy. Embracing and encouraging is hard. But it is the call of the gospel - the cry of the Savior to broken and chipped and cracked sinners, who need grace and give grace.