

Effective Master Grumbling Takes Discipline

Over the last month as I have taught on the discipline of having a quiet spirit, God has ministered to me about trusting Him, even when I don't quite understand. I've also been reading the Old Testament book of Numbers recently. The idea for this article was birthed as I amazed at how quickly the Israelites changed their tune from joyful celebration of God's miracle deliverance to the opposite extreme of complaining, in a very short time.

You need to know that this article is written "tongue in cheek," that is, it's a bit of a satire explaining how to be what God does NOT want us to be. The goal is that we do NOT end up as they did – grumbling and complaining. And if you see any of these steps happening in your heart, the true biblical response is to identify it as sin and repent – quickly, before it becomes cancer to your soul and to the body.

With that as an introduction, let's examine together the steps to becoming a master grumbler . . .

There are basically four steps to obtaining the high distinction of a "Master Grumbler." Not just a moderate grumbler but one who may potentially even advance toward the even higher status of "Rebellious One." Anyone can attain, but it requires work, yea sometimes striving labor, to consistently resist the work of the Holy Spirit and continue the progress. You must be positive and focus on your goal. With effort, you will attain.

We learn the secrets by seeing how it happened in the past – as the ancient Israelite slaves went from rejoicers and trusters to grippers and complainers. God had raised up a humbled shepherd, Moses, to lead His people to freedom from slavery. As slaves it was hard – but it was also simple for them. All they were supposed to do was what they were told. After all, slaves have no rights, no privileges, no expectations, and no opportunity to make decisions for themselves. Then came freedom. In a day, through the miracle of God's deliverance, they found themselves in the Sinai desert. Rejoicing . . . then soon grumbling . . . then soon seeking to overthrow Moses . . . you know, learning to live happily ever after kind of stuff. Let's examine the steps.

Step One – Forget who you really are before God.

This first step I don't think was all that intentional. I guess they were just lucky to fall into it. One minute they were slaves and the next they were free. Free from Egypt, that is. But they forgot that they had been "redeemed" – that is, they were purchased from slavery under the bad lords of Egypt, and were all the sudden the rightful property of the one, true, good Lord. They were still slaves, but now to the One who loved and treasured them.

But they forgot that they were really still slaves and started acting like they had special rights and privileges that slaves simply don't have. They forgot that all their desires, expectations, and decisions still needed to fall in line with their new Lord. Had they have remembered who they really were, they never would have never propelled themselves to the status of Junior, and later Master, Grumblers. Fortunately for them, their amnesia remained, allowing them to grow in the grace of grumbling.

Step Two – Learn to complain and whine about, and question things you don't understand.

After coming to the Sinai desert, they found they could ask the leaders questions and unlike in Egypt, didn't just hear a "shut up and get back to work" answer. It felt good to have someone care enough to answer. Of course, one who forgets he is a slave sometimes doesn't like the answers he hears. Then he learns to whine and complain. Really good complainers learn to whine and ask questions – all at the same time, since they already know they're not going to like the answer – no matter what it is.

This is seen in Numbers in various occasions but the best one happens when the Jews are getting ready to celebrate their first of forty Passovers in the desert (9:11). When they left Egypt, God had given them ALOT of laws and procedures – many pointed to Jesus, and many were for the health and sanitary practices of the community. One was about procedures to follow if you touched a dead carcass. Isolation for a period of days was required. He was "unclean," that is, not a "no good dirty rotten sinner", but a possible disease carrier and health risk.

As the celebration approached, some of the men who'd accidentally brushed against a dead carcass didn't like God's rule and approached Moses. They didn't want to miss the party. Their question was basically this: "Why can't we celebrate with everyone else? It's not our fault that we were touched by a dead body [?!]. It's just not fair." They knew what God had said, but they didn't like it because they didn't understand why. Fortunately for them, there weren't any Harvard medical students, or seminary students, to explain that God's way was best for health reasons. Otherwise they would have probably stopped complaining. But God doesn't always tell us the "why" behind everything He does. In fact, He rarely does.

At this point, if a person wants to progress in Grumbling, he has to make a choice to pretend like God is not really in control. Since he himself doesn't understand "why" or "what" God is doing, he talks himself in to justifying his complaining. If a person wants to ever become a Master Grumbler, he has to master this step. And another thing. If someone thinks he might have a plausible sounding reason for the "why," don't listen. It'll only tempt you to start trusting and stop complaining. Anyway, Moses sought the Lord. The Lord answered, confirming what He'd already said, but added a gracious addendum. Though they couldn't celebrate it with the rest, they could do so later when they were no longer "unclean". When Moses told them, he had some very whiny, unconvinced, forgot-they-were-slaves "unclean" men on his hands. They were well on their way to becoming Master Grumblers.

Step Three – Make The Hard Choice To Stay Disappointed

This is admittedly a hard step – but absolutely necessary if you ever really want to advance to "Master Grumbler."

Don't lose sight of the goal. In spite of the fact that God's Holy Spirit is prodding you to trust Him to do a mighty work in you, you still need to resist. To do so takes concentration & discipline. The reward is well worth the effort. Focus on your unmet expectation. Focus on your pain. Remember our "unclean, forgot-they-were-still-slaves, unable-to-attend-the-Passover Party" friends? If they can master step 3, so can you!!

The mind is a tricky thing, so don't let your thinking get away from you. You have to keep telling yourself what you want to believe, or you might lose your grip. This is especially important at this step since you will likely be distracted by the voice of the Holy Spirit telling you something you simply do not want to hear. He'll tell you stuff like, "Be at peace my child," or, "Trust your loving Father who knows about – and is orchestrating this – to mold you and bring blessing to you." Stuff like that. You know when it's Him. He uses words like "trust", "obey", "peace", and "love." But don't let it get to you. Expect the attack.

Instead, counteract His voice by your own. Do it quick though, or you'll get caught into His web of trust. Tell yourself things like, "I don't think God told Moses that. Who does this Moses think he is, anyway?!" This line worked great for Eve in the garden – it can work for you, too! Or you can say, "Moses doesn't really understand how important this Passover Party (or whatever your thing is) is to me. Moses just doesn't get it!" Whatever you say, keep the focus on Moses and on your pain.

But a word of caution here: Never say stuff like, "God doesn't understand," or "God just doesn't get it." No, no, no! Keep the focus on Moses. That way you don't have to directly deal with the fact that you're not really trusting God. True grumbling that is effective for eternity masks well that fact. Make Moses look like the one with the problem, not God, and surely not you.

Once you've again resisted the temptation to trust, make the choice to be unhappy about what God, er . . . I mean, what Moses has done to you. If you do this right, you'll eventually forget about the issue itself, or at least distort it's memory. That way, over time, you'll be protected against ever seeing that what God allowed or directed was really best after all. Whatever you do, keep YOUR perspective central, NOT God's promises. Keep convincing yourself that if you don't understand what's happening or why, then it surely can't be right. When you feel tempted to trust, consider the consequences. If you do, you may never get to participate in – or even lead – a real rebellion.

Step Four – Draw In Others To Share Your Disappointment

This last step sounds hard but it's not really. It's not like your trying to sell frozen food to Eskimos! Rather, keep in mind that this step will help you and others you share with. It will reinforce you and help you resist the temptation to repent, trust, and be molded by God. It will help others & give them a cause to champion. After all, we all like to root for the underdog – the little guy who's been abused by the power hungry tyrant. You know, like the poor guys Moses abused by not letting them celebrate Passover.

There are three important rules to follow to effectively share:

Rule One:

It's O.K. to tell only the part of the truth that helps others to feel your pain and see the injustice. Let me illustrate the rule. Your friend is one of Moses' abused. You say to someone, "Isn't it a shame that Moses won't let these poor guys celebrate Passover." Suddenly, you've got an advocate who feels the injustice and will stand with you against it. Ahhhh, the sweet savor of a ripe gripe!!

Now consider the disastrous results if the whole truth in the matter were disclosed. If you were to say, "Isn't it a shame that these guys touched a dead carcass. Since God's law requires them to be isolated for a time, they aren't able to celebrate Passover with us – but Moses said God is allowing them to celebrate later after their isolation." Remember, most people like a juicy story that will stir them. You're just giving them what they want.

Rule Two:

DO NOT actively enlist supporters of your position. Just share your rule-one version of the story. Then ask them if your disappointment, anger, hurt, etc., seems justified. Like I said, others will want to see the injustice and root for your cause. If you do it this way, you won't look like you're stirring division. The effect is still there – but you won't look like the bad guy . . . Moses will.

Rule Three:

(a good grumbler has already mastered this rule) DO point to Moses as the one who made the bad decision. This way you help the people forget that God is somehow behind, and working through the situation. This is essential to good grumbling. Though this rule almost goes without saying, I say it anyway. We mustn't forget. It's always better to make people think they're mad at Moses, not God. You see, most people are smart enough to not oppose and grumble at God directly, but can be more easily tricked into opposing Moses.

Concluding Thoughts

Note the progression in the book of Numbers . . .

God's, er . . . I mean, Moses' decision about the Passover left some folks disappointed and sad. Not just the unclean carcass touchers, but some of their friends. They felt sorry for the poor guys, thinking they should have been shown more consideration and grace and allowed to celebrate with the rest of them. Through time and practice, some of these "friends" also got to have a part in the "Anti-Mannah March" of chapter 11, and in the "Egypt Was Better" protest of chapter 14. It looks like some were even invited to the "Moses Is A Dork" party at Korah's in chapter 16. It's exciting to read!! Grumbling at it's best!!

So there you have it. A crash course in effective Grumbling in 4 easy steps. Oh, one word of caution that I must give as I have read up through chapter 16. As you embark on this journey, watch out for earthquakes and really, really, really big potholes in the road. Happy Grumbling!!