

# A Case Study in Human Rebellion

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 09 July 2017

Preacher: Joe Steele

[ 0 : 00 ] It's very, very good to be with you this morning. If you'll permit me, I'd like to pray before I begin, so pray with me, please. Our great God in heaven, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we come to you before your word, confessing that apart from Jesus Christ, we are nothing, and we have nothing.

We are so grateful to hold the word of God in our hands, the living word of the living God, and to read it and to hear it preached.

And we pray, Father, that you might grant your Holy Spirit to us, that we might be able to receive the word, to lay it up in our hearts, and to go forth practicing it in our lives, and we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen. I trust that many of you have heard of the Dutch theologian Cornelius van Til. He was a seminary professor at Old Princeton, until Old Princeton became exceeding the liberal, and then he broke off with some men and went and taught at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

He taught seminary students there for over 40 years. Van Til was known for many things, not the least of which was his belief that there was no such thing as neutral ground between believers and unbelievers.

[ 1 : 35 ] Van Til said that all of humanity can be categorized in two groups. On the one hand, you have those who, by the grace of God, love God's truth, and they submit to it.

And then you have the other group of humanity who suppress God's truth, and they rebel against it. And Van Til said, you can't be somewhere in between.

You're in one of those camps, but not in between. I mention that to you because this is a text about human rebellion. And it was something that Van Til ironically saw illustrated in a very powerful way. You may have heard this story before, but he was traveling on a train, and seated right across from him on the other side of the aisle was a father, and he had his little girl in his lap.

And they were talking quite nicely to one another. And then Van Til saw this little girl seemingly out of nowhere reach up and just maliciously slap her daddy in the face.

[ 2 : 42 ] And when Van Til saw that, he thought to himself, this is a perfect picture of human rebellion. That all of us, we are like that little girl.

Seemingly every day of our lives, we reach up and we slap our heavenly father in the face, not realizing that we owe our very existence to him, and not realizing that the only reason we can reach up and slap him in the face is because we're supported by his lap.

This is a text about human rebellion. And the first thing that I want you to see from the text this morning is that human rebellion against God is a death deserving sin.

It's a death deserving sin. We didn't have time to do it this morning, but you almost would need to read Numbers 16 to make sense of Numbers 17.

If you may recall, Numbers 16 is about the rebellion of Korah and his rebellious relatives. And they rebelled against Moses and Aaron.

[ 3 : 48 ] These two men that God had called and equipped and appointed as their leaders, and they wanted nothing to do with these two men. And they did some rather audacious things.

The first thing that they did in Numbers 16 is they accused Moses and Aaron of elevating themselves above the congregation. They said to Moses and Aaron, you guys are special, but we're all special.

We should be like you. Then they went so far as to accuse Moses and Aaron of negligent homicide. There wasn't even the Bible, I wouldn't believe it, but the people rose up and said to Moses and Aaron, you brought us into the wilderness in order to kill us.

And they accused them of lying. You said you would take us to a land of milk and honey, but in fact you brought us out here so we can starve to death and not have water.

These were the men that God had appointed. And I take all of Numbers 16 as a subtle and timeless reminder that man does not like to be underneath the authority of God.

[ 5 : 01 ] He does not like to be there. Man wants to be in charge. He wants to be his own governor, his own ruler. And when God comes and says to do certain things, or when he appoints men as leaders over us, we rebel against it.

And we see little clues of it in everyday life. You see it in your children when they don't obey you. Parents, you are God's vice regents in your home. He's given you as authority figures.

When they rebel against you, they're rebellion against God. We see it in churches when people refuse to submit to the authority of God appointed leaders and so on and so forth.

It's just a vicious cycle. Man does not like to be ruled by God. Now, in response to the rebellious attitudes of the people, you may recall what God told Moses and Aaron to do.

He told them, separate yourselves from the people because I'm going to destroy them. And that's when Moses and Aaron fell on their faces and they pleaded with God. They begged him not to destroy his covenant children.

[ 6 : 07 ] And God listened to the prayers of those two men, his servants. And he told the people, okay, you have an opportunity to separate yourself. Separate yourself from Korah and his sons, and if you do, I will spare you.

And after they were given an opportunity to do that, those that refused to submit, God began to meet out his punishment. It's one of the most horrific incidences, I think, in the Old Testament of God judging sinners.

He opened up the earth and people fell into it, and then he closed the ground over it. Can you think of a more horrifying way to die than to be buried alive?

For 250 other men, God sent down fire from heaven and he incinerated them. And then the next day, the people of Israel rose up again, still hardened in their unbelief, and they accused Moses and Aaron of having all the blood of all those men on their hands.

And it was almost as if that was the last straw for God. And he unleashed a plague and it killed 14,700 Israelites.

[ 7 : 23 ] And that brings us to number 17, because the instructions here in number 17 were a direct result of the people's sin.

Most notably of which, and you'll see the word occur over and over in the text, was the sin of grumbling. Some of your Bibles may translate it as murmuring or complaining.

This idea of a complainatory spirit in the heart of man that very often manifests itself in sins of speech against God and against God's people.

I was a pilot for most of my life in the Marine Corps. Went through Navy flight training and I had a friend who in the midst of flight training had to leave training because he was diagnosed with a heart murmur.

I don't know if you've ever heard of that, but heart murmur happens when you have turbulent blood flow in your heart. The ironic thing is he lived his whole life, totally oblivious to the fact that he had a heart murmur.

[ 8 : 25 ] But when you go to the U.S. Navy medical facility, they put you under these diagnostic machines and those machines recognized it right away and he was not able to fly anymore.

The sad reality for us is that we don't need a diagnostic machine to expose our murmuring and our grumbling. It's apparent all the time.

It dominates our homes as we grumble against our spouses and against our children and our finances and just it wells up in us all the time.

The text tells us that the chief reason behind God's frustration with Israel was this grumbling.

Look at verse 5. He says, And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. And then there's a purpose clause.

[ 9 : 29 ] Thus, or for this reason, I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel which they grumble against you. So the whole reason God is going to do this supernatural miracle is so that the grumbling will stop.

But I wonder if you noticed inadvertently that the correlation that the text makes between grumbling against the leaders of God and the fact that God says that's the same thing as grumbling against

me.

Now I'm not your pastor and so it's very easy for me to say this to you because I will probably never see you again. But this is harder to say to your own congregation. But may I exhort you as God's people to be very careful about rebelling against the men that God has appointed over you.

I admonish you by the Holy Spirit to be careful about murmuring against them and grumbling against their fallen men.

They will make mistakes. But I think it's incumbent upon us as we read this text and we see the correlation that God himself makes, that we be sober-minded and careful about how we treat the leaders that God has given to you in His grace and His mercy.

[ 10 : 51 ] Be mindful that they have a grave responsibility to shepherd the flock of God. It is not easy work. And more than that, the Scripture is very clear.

All the men that serve you in positions of authority, they will incur a stricter judgment on the last day because they're leaders. They need your sympathy and your support, not your murmuring and your grumbling.

Now that does not mean for a moment that they're beyond justified criticism. But just be careful.

According to God, this is my reading of the text as I understand it.

It seems to me that grumbling and complaining, use those two words interchangeably, this was not just a sin among God's people, at least in this context.

This was the sin. This was the main problem. And what I found perplexing in the text is this. Of all the sins that the people of Israel committed, and there were many of them, why is it that God was so particularly disturbed by grumbling?

[ 12 : 06 ] He even says here in the text in verse 10 that their grumbling needs to cease lest they die.

What is it that makes grumbling and complaining and murmuring a capital crime? Why is it so heinous?

The Westminster Confession talks about certain sins being more grievous than others. And this seems to be one of those sins that in the sight of God is especially grievous.

I give you three reasons why grumbling is such a terrible sin among God's people. The first is this. Grumbling spurns God's authority.

It spurns, it rejects God's authority. When you grumble and you complain, what you're essentially saying to God is that you want to be in charge, and that if you were in charge, things would be much better off.

[ 13 : 06 ] If you controlled providence, then the thing that makes you grumble wouldn't be happening. It's a very prideful behavior to grumble against God. I love the way that Paul Tripp defines this.

He says, when you grumble, you don't want God's way. You want what you want. When you grumble, you don't want God's way or God's will.

You want what you want in that very moment. And we know from Scripture that this grumbling spirit, it flows out of our hearts.

Jesus said in Luke 6.45, out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. Grumbling doesn't start with your mouth, it starts down in your heart.

And that's hard to hear because if you're like me, you want to believe that it's your spouse that makes you grumble, or it's your children that make you grumble, or it's your job that makes you grumble, or it's your finances that make you grumble, when in fact it's your heart that makes you grumble.

[ 14 : 11 ] It's your heart that is unsettled with God's providence. The second reason why grumbling is so serious is because grumbling spurns God's goodness and His glory.

One commentator explains it this way. When God's people grumble, they miss out on their chief end in life. As long as they are grumbling, they are neither glorifying God nor enjoying Him.

When we grumble against the order that God has set in place for our lives, we are robbing God of the praise and glory that is due unto Him. Every time you grumble, friends, there's a sense in which you rob God of His goodness.

I met a pastor a couple of years ago who told me a story about his son. His son I think was in his early 30s, but he had a severe profound case of autism.

Even though the young man was in his early 30s, he basically had the mind of a seven-year-old. He acted like a seven-year-old. The father is a pastor, spends a lot of time away from his family, but he came to this son one summer and he said, I want to do something special with you.

[15:27] It's going to be just the two of us. You tell me where you want to go and I'm going to stop all working and we're going to go and we're just going to enjoy each other. And his son said he wanted to go on a cruise.

So they booked tickets to go on this cruise. And the whole trip was about bringing joy to the son. Now remember, he's 30 years old, but he's got the mind of a seven-year-old.

So he wanted to see all the silly characters and the shows, and he wanted to swim in the pools, and he had an obsession with the color orange. So every meal, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, they ordered everything that was orange on the menu, not because the father likes orange food, but because the son likes orange food.

And then he said that on the last day of the cruise, this son of his accidentally locked himself in the bathroom. I think you would say the toilet room.

If you've ever been on a cruise ship, you know that those toilet rooms are really small. And he got in there and locked the door, and he couldn't get out.

[16:34] And he started trying to fiddle with the lock, and his dad was on the other side of the door saying, son, calm down, just listen to me. You've got to turn the lock this way, you've got to do this. Well, the son suffers from claustrophobia a little bit, and he began to panic.

He began to scream and cry. He pounded on the door so hard that security had to come to the room. This lasted for 15 minutes. And then finally, the boy accidentally turned the lock the right way, and the door opened up, and his son came out just livid, angry.

He pointed his fist right in his dad's face and said, you never do anything for me. And his father realized, that's exactly how we treat God.

We so easily forget all the goodness that he's bestowed on us. And the minute something doesn't go the way that we want it to, we lash out at him.

The reality is that as Christians, every single one of us is mentally handicapped. When you complain and you grumble, you vandalize God's goodness.

[17:58] The third reason why grumbling is so grievous is that it spurns God's plan. I preached through the book of Exodus in my first two years at my home church, and one of the things that amazed me about the book of Exodus is this.

It was not by accident that Israel was trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptians. God put them there. They were headed for the wilderness, and God stopped Moses, and he intentionally rerouted them and put them in a place where they could not escape.

It was not by accident that they were thirsty and hungry in the wilderness. God did all of that for the very purpose of manifesting his power in the midst of them.

He did those things to produce faith and dependence, and when you grumble at the circumstances of life, you lose sight of that. You forget that the things that make you prone to grumble are most likely the very things that God has brought into your life to make Jesus Christ more precious and more valuable to you.

When I was a young man, one of the first lines of poetry that I ever memorized, and I still carry it with me to this day, was by a poet named Francis Willett, and he writes, God, I thank you for the bitter things.

[19:19] They've been a friend to grace. They have driven me from the paths of ease to storm the secret place. And I wonder if you've learned that.

Have you learned that in the midst of your suffering that God uses it to drive you to a place where you experience intimacy and relationship with him, you would never, ever experience otherwise.

But when you grumble, you lose sight of all of that. You're blind to it. I think it may be helpful at this point to make a distinction between sinful grumbling and suffering-induced groaning.

Some of you may be in a very dark place in life. You may feel like Christian in the pilgrim's progress, where you're down in the dungeon of doubting castle under the screw of giant despair. God brings hard days in the lives of his people, and that produces honest expressions of sorrow and grief and agony, but that is not to be confused with sinful grumbling.

[20:29] We're designed as fallen creatures to groan when life hurts. Paul says to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 10, speaking about what happened to Israel and the wilderness, we must not

put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

And then Paul says, these things happen to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come. When Paul exhorts the church in Corinth not to grumble, he is not forbidding them from groaning over hard life.

We live in a fallen world where broken people, it hurts. I would even look to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who groaned with agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, who groaned over the unbelief of Jerusalem, who groaned and wept over the death of his beloved friend Lazarus, and he did all of that sinlessly.

So there has to be a distinction between groaning and grumbling. Hold that distinction in your minds.

Despite the immense gravity of the sin of grumbling, did you see the merciful nature of God in number 17? I think God at this point would have been fully justified in just destroying all of Israel. [ 22 : 01 ] Instead, what does he do? He comes not in the form of a final judgment in number 17, but he comes with a form of instruction. He behaves like a father who gets down and takes a knee and looks his children in the face and teaches them what to believe and how to behave.

And most notably what God does here in number 17 is he teaches his people about their need for a mediator. They're going to need someone who will stand between a holy God and a sinful people, and they've got to learn the necessity of that truth.

So in the first place this morning we saw that grumbling is a death-deserving sin, but secondly we see that grumbling or rebellion demands a mediator.

Moses, or rather Aaron, was a mediator. An mediator is someone who settles differences between conflicting parties.

It was Aaron's God-appointed duty to come in between Israel and God and mediate that relationship. It was powerfully demonstrated back in chapter 16.

[ 23 : 17 ] If you'll look in your Bibles on number 16, verses 46 through 48. Listen to Aaron's task here. Moses said to Aaron, take your censer and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them.

For wrath has gone out from the Lord, the plague has begun. So Aaron took it, as Moses said, and he ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people, and he put on the incense and made atonement for the people, and he stood between the dead and the living.

And the plague was stopped. The point that God is making there is very simple. Without a mediator we have no chance of survival before a holy God.

And that's why God went through such great lengths here in number 17 to validate the ministry and the mediation of Aaron. And he did it by working a miracle in verse 8 of chapter 17.

Aaron's rod sprouted and it put forth buds and produced blossoms and it bore ripe almonds. God needed for Aaron's ministry to be validated and vindicated in the presence of the people.

[ 24 : 40 ] And did you notice how they responded? They were absolutely silent. They couldn't argue with it. God had said, listen, I'll show you who your leader is.

Let's do this thing where we put the stabs in the arc and then I will cause a miracle to be produced on one of them. And you will know for sure who is my appointed man.

And God did that. He had spoken and they were completely silent. It reminded me of what Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones used to say. He used to describe Christians in this way.

A Christian is one whose mouth has been shut. All the arguing with God stops.

You hear his word by the grace of God. You submit to it. You stop making a defense of yourself. A Christian is one whose mouth has been shut.

[ 25 : 40 ] God vindicated Aaron. And yet as you read the rest of your Bibles, you know that Aaron's ministry, even though it was validated by God, it was tragically inadequate.

Aaron couldn't stop the people from grumbling because he couldn't stop their sin problem. Aaron applied his trade in the law of God and the law of God can show you that grumbling is a sin, but it can't stop you from grumbling.

And I have living proof of that in my household because my wife is here today and she has a problem with this by the way. But in our home, in virtually every room of our house, we have Scripture on our walls, the law of God.

We have Scripture verses in our dining room and in our kitchen and in our children's room. And they're plastered on the walls in our living room and yet the spirit of rebellion lives on in our house every day.

We can't stop it. We grumble and we complain and we murmur against each other and against God. [ 26 : 55 ] We don't need someone or something to manage our grumbling. What we need is someone to pay for it, to bear its penalty.

And I'm guessing in a congregation of this size, there are any number of you you intensely struggle with a complainatory spirit. It's a grave sin. You spurn God's authority. You rob him of his goodness and his glory. You spurn his plans that he's designed for you.

But my privilege as a minister of the gospel this morning is to remind you that the reason why forgiveness is available to you is because you had a high priest or you have a high priest who had a perfectly sinless mouth and a pure heart.

If any man on the face of the earth ever had a justified reason to grumble and to complain, it was our Lord Jesus.

[ 28 : 01 ] He was falsely accused. He was publicly shamed. He was sentenced to death for crimes he did not commit by men that he himself had created and had given the right to breathe.

And yet the prophet Isaiah says that he was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, like a sheep that is silent before its shears. He opened not his mouth.

And you understand that if he had, all would have been lost. If he had spurned the authority of the Father, if he had questioned the goodness of God, if he had despised the plan of God for his life, you would still be in your sin. And so would I.

We have a great high priest who is holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

And that is exactly what we need because we are like that little girl on her father's lap every day reaching up, slapping him right in the face. And the good news of the gospel this morning, friends, is God has provided you a mediator, a perfect man to stand between a holy God and a sinful people.

[ 29 : 33 ] And not just to stand between the living and the dead like Aaron did, but to enter into death and to bear all your penalty in his own body on the tree.

And all God's people said, Amen.