

Philippians 2:14-16

*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 forth 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.*

If you were able to ask the apostle Paul why he expended so much effort to plant churches in present-day Greece and Turkey, this passage is one of the answers he would give. His labor would be more than worth it if these churches lived as lights in a dark world. This picture of Christians as lights of the world echoes Jesus' own teaching:

Matthew 5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Jesus' words imply that humanity lives in darkness; Paul's words are explicit about the nature of that darkness. Apart from Jesus, human individuals and human societies are "crooked and perverse." These words speak of a morally culpable "bentness" or "brokenness." Cut off from our Creator by our sins, we are self-centered rather than God-centered – and we reap in our own lives and societies the damage of this way of life. So pervasive and insidious is this darkness that we are



usually only dimly aware of what it is doing to us until we come to Jesus, the Light of the world.

But once we come to the Light of the world, He commissions us to be His lights in the world. In spite of our continuing brokenness, He has decided to work through us to draw others to Himself. Through our conduct, He can display an attractive picture of how He designed humans to live. And through our words, He can speak a compelling message that invites people to come out of the darkness into His light. Let's take a closer look at what Paul says about this picture and message.

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing.” What an accurate description of the natural disposition of fallen human hearts! “Grumbling” means “complaining.” “Grumbling” is the inevitable outcome of people who focus on what they don't have. And when people don't know God, and don't have access to His love, grumbling is what they naturally do. That's why grumbling about the boss is a perennially popular activity. That's why grumbling about our spouses and children and neighbors seems so justified. That's why people tend to grumble more as they get older. C. S. Lewis warned that unless we meet Jesus and follow Him, our lives will eventually become an interminable grumble.

The opposite of grumbling, of course, is gratitude. When lost people interact with God's people, one thing they should be struck by is how grateful they are. How intriguing and attractive it is to interact with people who have the same problems and challenges as everyone else, but who are genuinely grateful for what they do have. And no wonder, because what we have is a personal relationship with a God who loves us and watches over us and promises to do good to us. But people are rarely interested in our God unless our gratitude significantly outweighs their grumbling. Maybe this is why Paul devotes much of Philippians 4 to reminding us to rejoice in the Lord, to take our anxieties to Him with thankfulness, and to set our minds on all the good things He has given



us. Grateful Christians are lights who expose by positive contrast the emptiness of life without God.

“Disputing” means arguing. “Disputing” is the opposite of a cooperative spirit. Of course, Christians are to resist what is untrue and destructive. But we are to be known as people who are easy to get along with, who contribute positively to our communities, and who are respectful and cooperative toward our work and civil authorities. Paul elsewhere elaborates on this aspect of being lights in the world:

Titus 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, ² to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.

Unfortunately, Christians have a reputation in our culture for being mean-spirited, argumentative, uncaring – even toxic. Although this reputation is not necessarily fair, it is true enough of the time to give Jesus a bad reputation. No wonder Paul says: “Don’t add to the darkness with your own disputing; let Jesus’ love for all humanity shine through you!”

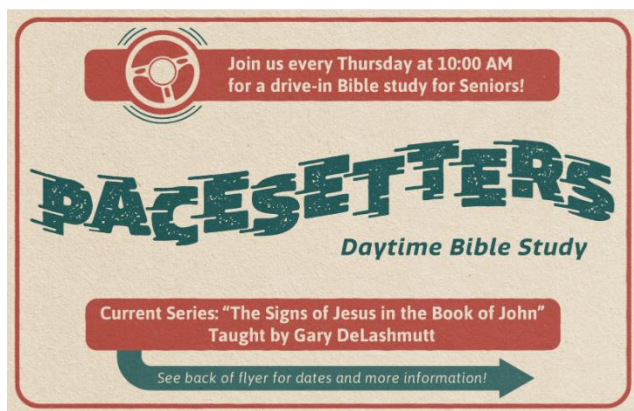
“Holding forth the word of life.” Most English translations say “holding fast the word of life.” The Greek word (*epecho*) can mean either, but the immediate context suggests that “holding forth” is better here. After all, Paul is describing how Christians are in the world as lights in order to influence other people toward Jesus. We are to *display* a grateful and cooperative spirit for this purpose. And we are to *hold forth* (or hold out) a message that invites people to meet Jesus. This is the message that says: “God loves you so much that He sent His Son to die for all of your sins. You can be reconciled with God, just as you are, by simply entrusting yourself to Jesus.” Hold forth this message – politely, wisely, patiently, and boldly – as the good news that it is. Let people know that whatever good they see in your life is because of



Jesus' influence. And invite people to receive Jesus as the light that will change their lives!

Lord Jesus, thank You for bringing Your people across our paths. Thank You for drawing our attention to their grateful and cooperative hearts. And thank You for empowering them to hold forth Your word of life to us. We are humbled that You want to shine Your light on others through us. We are aware of our many inadequacies – but we present ourselves to You today to “shine as lights.”

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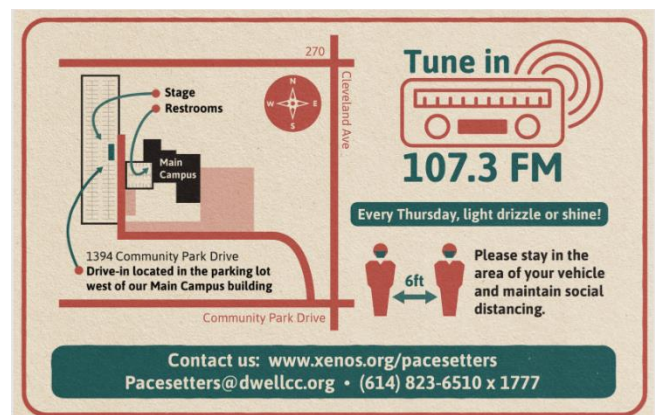


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