

Intercession in an Age of Complaint

Good morning church! My name is Colton LeBoeuf and I am the director of groups & discipleship here at City Church. This is my second time preaching up here since I've come on board, so I guess the first one couldn't have been too bad. That or they are just slow on paperwork around here.

If you have your bibles, turn with me to Philippians 2. While you're getting there, I'm gonna throw something out there that is probably the understatement of the century. People are frustrating. Wouldn't you agree? Like anywhere from mildly frustrating to mind-numbingly so. Before I worked at City Church, I had worked in several different industries, and the restaurants I have worked in were particularly challenging relationally. For those of you who have worked in restaurants previously or who currently are, I'm so sorry. God bless you. I do think that everyone should have at least one restaurant job in their life. Hopefully, it will give you some more compassion for workers in that industry. If nothing else, you will learn to be grateful for every other job you will ever have as long as you live.

For those who've worked in restaurants, you know how difficult people -- both employees and customers -- can be. For those who've made it through life without working in the food industry, let me give you a few examples from my time managing at a fast food restaurant. Now, this location was really struggling, so much so that when I started, my mission from the operations guy was literally to 'lose less money' - not really the most enticing offer looking back on it. There was one guy there named Justin. Justin would always do this weird thing where he would drink and party all night and then sleep all day. Which is fine unless you have a job during the day and need to sleep at night - and also realize that you don't actually better your life in any way by drinking and partying - which was the case for Justin. We had to call Justin on the phone several times before every shift to make sure he was awake and, in fact, coming in to work his shift that day. Frustrating. He had access to an alarm, yet couldn't be bothered enough to set it.

I had another employee that I was training say to my face, "I don't care about the customer enough to clean off their table". My thought was, "Wow, this is so much worse than I originally thought! I thought you were just forgetful, turns out you shouldn't even be a server at all..."

I have experienced a seemingly infinite amount of frustrating situations from my previous jobs, definitely none at City Church though. It has been all sunshine and daisies, and I

have absolutely nothing to complain about. No issues relationally, no conflict, no discomfort... If you haven't noticed, sarcasm is my passion.

The reality is that we all have frustrating people in our lives. Maybe for you it's your coworkers, your classmates, your neighbors ... Maybe it's your in-laws or your out-laws or your mechanic or your barista. Maybe for you the most frustrating person in your life is someone you are closest with: Your wife, your kids, your roommates, your siblings. Maybe it's someone in your lifegroup. Maybe it's Kent, after that sermon on ideology a few weeks ago... You will be frustrated with someone in your life at some point and probably on a semi-regular basis at that. The only way we will not frustrate one another is if we spend our life living alone in the woods like a hermit. Or if we are absolutely perfect, 100% of the time. Can I get a show of hands if you are absolutely perfect 100% of the time? See, even the enneagram 1's aren't raising their hands. I think I did see a few 8's with their hands up, and before you ask, no I don't want to argue with you about it.

There really isn't a realistic way to avoid every frustrating situation. And if that's true, it seems like it'd be helpful to know what to do with that frustration when it inevitably happens. This morning, I am going to lay out some of the ways we often respond that I think cause more harm than good, and then we will take a look at scripture and see how we are to be different from the world - for the sake of the world. How does that sound?

Tell me if this sounds familiar:

We find ourselves in a frustrating situation. Let's say someone in our lifegroup goes on a rant about a topic we really don't care about. Maybe our roommate, who knows how to push buttons, decides for some reason that today of all days is our turn to be terrorized. Maybe we get cut off in traffic, some bozo makes us miss the light, and a coworker takes our parking spot. Maybe your kids just won't let up and they go on the classic "why, why, why" questions like a broken record, or maybe they say a four letter word at school and we have to clean up that mess.

We get frustrated. Agggghhhh, I can't believe this. Are you kidding me? Wow, that is so frustrating. I am mad, I'm angry, I'm upset, and frankly I'm hurt. We get emotional, there is a tension in our heart that has to be dealt with. So what do we do about it? Well, we don't want to freak out, we don't want to lose our temper. It's not that big of a deal. Be chill. Be calm. No need to freak out, but you know what we will do? We'll just check in with someone else just to make sure we aren't crazy.

We gossip. Dress it up as 'venting' or 'processing' if we like, the reality is that when we go to other people and share our frustrations about someone else, with the goal of

finding some emotional release or to win them over to our side - we are gossiping. Now, typically one of two things happen here. That friend will say something like “dang yeah that's tough. Yeah, that guy's the worst” and you feel validated in your emotions and your hurt. OR they won't say that. And we are forced to go find someone else who will.

But whether it's the first person we talk to, the second, third, fourth, or twentieth person we talk to, when someone finally agrees with and affirms our frustration, here's what that does for us... We get more frustrated and we feel justified in it. We haven't really dealt with the tension in our hearts. We have just pacified it with self-righteousness. We have already decided that we are right and then we went and confirmed it with someone else, 2 vs 1: boom I win... Ah what a relief... But if we are honest with ourselves, we don't usually experience any lasting relief. What we have **told ourselves** we were doing is 'venting', 'processing' so that we can deal with our frustration. But most of the time, that's not what happens. Most of the time, we actually feel more **justified** and righteous in our frustration, which makes us **more** frustrated the next time it happens. It ends up having the opposite effect that what we thought it would. And then, it resurfaces the next time we get frustrated... So here we go again, only this time there is momentum going into the cycle. *I knew it. I knew they would do it again. Look dude, they did it again. Can you believe it? Well I can. I should have known better to think they would change. UGH.* We build up resentment. We build up bitterness. For some of us, this is the extent of our processing, and this is the very nature of our friendships. Our entire friendship with someone is based on venting and complaining about our frustrations about other people. We have a relationship based on complaining and commiseration.

The cycle continues and continues. On and on and on until eventually we become so frustrated that we run off the rails like a runaway train. We get so emotionally entangled and confused that we do things we know are wrong. We just have to do something! We lash out. We say something we know we shouldn't, we yell. We don't mean to lose control; it's just too much and we can't handle it anymore, and we act out in ways that we would never could have imagined. Sometimes it's so extreme that it feels like an out of body experience.

Or maybe we are more subtle than all of that. Maybe we let it out in bursts with passive aggressive comments. Or we respond in kind and do the very thing to them that they did to us! Or maybe it's even more subtle and covert. We start going after their reputation; we tell people they should stay away from them. We say, “I wouldn't trust them. And I'm not going to tell you why... I don't want to gossip... just don't get too close. They aren't worth the trouble”.

Maybe for some of us we don't take it out on them, we turn our frustrations inward. We don't want to lash out at someone else, so we just become martyrs, and we project our frustration and pain onto others. We start to see everyone as being frustrating, and we grow a generalized discontentment for every situation. We convince ourselves that no one could love us in the ways we need or even see us. We decide that the best option is probably to check out of our relationships, to just get through them, and then sit and watch TV all day.

Now you might say to all of that, "Yeah that sounds about right. What's the problem? Eye for an eye". We might say that sounds like justice. That's what they get, it's only fair. Maybe it is fair. But is it actually helpful to anyone? Think about it for a minute. **The only possible scenario that lashing out or manipulating to manage our pain would be helpful is if the other party were to be bullied into repentance. When has that ever worked out for us? The real danger I see here is that we never end up addressing the pain in our own hearts. We indulge our self-pity with aggression.** Or maybe we indulge our self-pity by sitting in it. We don't lash out, but we bottle it all up, pretend it's not a problem, and we end up making ourselves completely miserable, discouraged, and discontent in the process. We never end up stirred with compassion. We drown ourselves in resentment and bitterness. This is the way that the world responds. Sound familiar? Maybe all too familiar for some of us.

But as we've been saying this entire series, we are called to be different from the world. We are called to be a City on a Hill. We as followers of Jesus are called to be distinct from the world - for the sake of the world. That second part is key. We aren't called to be different so that we can feel better about ourselves or so that we can let others know exactly how much better we are than them; we are called to be different so that we might show the world what life with Jesus is like! - That they would see God in us and be reconciled to Him. Or as Matthew 5:14 says it that they would "... glorify your Father in heaven."

So how are we called to be different, specifically as it relates to interpersonal frustrations? As followers of Christ here is where it starts: **YOU ARE NOT THE MAIN CHARACTER OF THE STORY.** Look with me at Philippians 2:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value

others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Paul here is writing a letter to the Church in Philippi, and he is saying that if you have indeed tasted and seen that the Lord is good, then keep going! Don't stop just at receiving for yourself. Serve! Love! Take care of your brother and sister too! Paul is saying here "I'd love it if you continued to serve other people the way you yourselves have been served by Jesus." It's like when everybody at Starbucks pays for the coffee of the next person, it gets to you and you just go "sweet, thanks for the coffee," and don't keep it going. Don't be that guy. Instead, V.5:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

This is what God has done for us. The creator of the universe, for our sake, chose humility - a kind of humility that none of us can truly comprehend. The all powerful, all knowing, all capable God that we worship chose to put on skin and bone, He lived, He died, and He rose to rescue us. Paul is saying here, think again about how Jesus has dealt with us. He did not use His power against us. He, in many ways, set aside His power and position so that he could empathize with us and meet us where we're at. V12:

Therefore [Because of all of this] , my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

In other words: Don't forget what Jesus has done for us; let us learn from Him to think how He thinks and act how He acts. And he goes on to tell us how we are to respond:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.

Jesus didn't complain and gossip about us. He didn't use his power to bully us, but instead made Himself our servant, and we should learn to think about and to treat others the same way. Stay away from grumbling and arguing, that isn't what God does with us. Scripture says that His **kindness** is what leads us to repentance¹. Jesus doesn't bully us into repentance, into change. He loves us so extravagantly, that we become stirred from the heart to repent. We are called to be a people who choose to respond with kindness even when we have every right to respond with aggression. **Paul is saying that as we become more and more like God, we look less and less like the world. We will stand out like stars in the sky as we hold firmly to the word of life, as we continue to pursue Jesus.** Sounds a lot like being a city on a hill doesn't it? What a coincidence!

In light of all that, how about this let's go back to that situation we started with:

You find yourself in a frustrating situation. LifeGroup member rants, roommate pushes our buttons, cut off in traffic, lost our parking spot, kid says a four letter word - all the frustrating stuff again.

We get frustrated. Agggghhhh, I can't believe this. Are you kidding me? Wow, that is so frustrating. I am mad, I'm angry, I'm upset, and frankly I'm hurt. We get emotional, there is tension in our heart that has to be dealt with.

Now, here is the difference for us as followers of Jesus:

¹ Romans 2:4

Here is our magic bullet - WE HAVE GOD. The king of kings, the provider, protector, the wonderful counselor is also Immanuel: God with us. The Spirit of God dwells within us². How many of us truly understand that we can receive everything our souls need from God? We can receive all the love, acceptance, validation, empathy, compassion that our heart desires, straight from God. THAT, my brothers and sisters, is what is different about us. We aren't solely at the mercy of those around us to meet the needs of our heart. We have a God who longs to care for us. We have the option to FIRST **Go To God** with our emotions, with our pain, with the tension in our hearts. Hebrews 4:14-16 says it this way:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses**, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, **so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**

Jesus, who is our 'great high priest', because of **the way** He rescued us, is able to empathize with us. He gets it! He knows what it is like to be frustrated, to be rejected, to be blamed, accused, and punished. He himself bore our shame on the cross³. And because of this, we are free to approach Him without fear. Now, this doesn't mean that this has to be perfect, or even pretty. The vulnerability of some of the psalms can be quite shocking. There are more than a few psalms that are brutally honest, ugly, and hard to read. One of my very favorite things about God, though, is that He doesn't require us to be perfect, yet in the same breath he offers a challenge and encouragement to become more like Him. We can trust that we will be met with mercy and grace, that God will help us in our time of need.

The best part is that we don't have to do it alone! This is where we can come to our brothers and sisters and ask for help. 'Hey, I am trying to take this to God, but I'm struggling. I don't really see how he can be good in this situation, I don't know how to be thankful, and I sure as heck don't know what to do.' The difference between going to our friend this time vs the gossip from earlier is this: **Since we have taken our frustration and pain to Jesus, we are no longer propelled BY our tension and frustration, rather we are dealing with it directly. The goal is no longer for us to get emotional validation or social allegiance. It is for the purpose of helping us learn to obey Christ!** And in the process we give a brother or sister in Christ space to spur us on! AND anyone around us in these conversations gets a glimpse of gospel.

² 1 Corinthians 3:16

³ Hebrews 12:2

When we receive healing in our hearts, compassion, and help from God and our fellow believers, **we have freedom then to respond with a clear mind and an unburdened heart.** And as followers of Jesus, **our response is intercession.** We can now go to God on behalf of others. We are called to be a people who pray for one another, and we are called to do this for anyone who hurts us, wrongs us, or frustrates us, from our best friends all the way down to our absolute worst enemies. Our response in EVERY situation and frustration is to PRAY, to INTERCEDE for that person. Don't just take my word for it. Look up at the screen with me. This is Jesus speaking in Matthew 5 starting in verse 43:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

A lot of us hear this and we are tracking up until that last sentence and we go ‘woah’ what? Perfect? That’s too much, and we ignore the whole passage. No, obey what you do understand and dig into the part you don’t. The word for perfect here can be better understood as mature or whole. Jesus here isn’t just being a little teacher’s pet. He is challenging us to grow in obedience and to become more like God⁴.

Jesus says here that the world plays by the ‘eye for an eye’ rules, but for us we are to pray for our enemies, to petition God on their behalf, and if Jesus tells us that this is how we are to respond when our enemies *persecute* us, how much more should we be responding with prayer for our brothers and sisters who *frustrate* us?!

Having said all of that, I want to leave us today with a few encouragements for intercession, for going to God on behalf of others. But let’s make sure here that we put the first things first. We must choose to go to God FIRST to address the tension in our hearts, and only then will we be able to pray with compassion for others. Here are a few tips to get us started:

⁴ Blomberg 115

Pray with humility. Choose to start this whole process as if you haven't figured everything out already. You don't have to be perfect to start. You don't have to know all the right words, have the longest prayers, have the perfect space, or spend 4 hours per day praying. And, you don't have to figure it out alone. In Luke 11 Jesus taught the disciples to pray. In Matthew 6 Jesus says we don't need to ramble on with lengthy and demonstrative words, because God knows what we need before we ask. Romans 8 says that even when we don't know the words to pray, the Spirit Himself will help us. Exodus 17 gives us a beautiful picture of what it looks like to pray together. You don't have to do it alone.

Start small and pray from your heart. It's not like one of those job postings for an entry level job that requires five years of experience. We are all on a journey, from the one who is just starting all the way to the heroes of the faith, whose journal entries we read for inspiration. We are all learning and growing day by day. Don't let a lack of experience keep you from starting.

The second encouragement I have for you today is to **Pray with persistence.** Choose to create the habit of praying for the people God has placed in your life. Just like everything in life that requires discipline, intercession is not easy. You have to make a conscious choice to do it, and I have learned that it is easier to create a habit than it is to manufacture willpower. Decide that you are a person who prays for others, and create a habit of intercession that works for you. If you're a calendar person, mark off a time slot every week for you to pray for others. My wife sets alarms on her phone every so often to pray for specific people and specific situations. For me I always have a white board up somewhere with the names of everyone God has put me in close proximity to. I have seen people make a print-out of everything they are praying for and I have seen people put up sticky notes all over their house to remind them to pray. Whatever you need to do, work intercession into your schedule and create a habit of praying for others.

The third encouragement is to **Bless them.** Jesus said to pray and he also said to love. Romans 12 says "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse". At a bare minimum, we need to respond with kindness. Not the passive aggressive, self righteous type of words just for show, not a cold shoulder, but true kindness. If you find that you are unable to be kind, that's a good sign for you that you need to go back to God and deal with some things in your heart. One way to bless them is with spoken or written encouragement. When was the last time that you called out the way you see God at work in someone's life? If you have ever had someone do that for you unprompted you know how much of a gift that is. Do this for the people you are praying for, and you will be surprised by how much God softens your heart each time. And then there are times where blessing our brothers and sisters looks like loving confrontation. Sometimes the

most loving thing you can do is to help someone see their own sin that they are blind to. Let me be clear on this: If you are going around confronting sin without first praying over your heart and praying for the one you are confronting, you are treading on dangerous ground. Jesus has plenty of words for the hypocritical and pharisaical heart. Your confrontation needs to be sourced out of obedience to Christ, and for the purpose of drawing your brother or sister closer to Christ. I would encourage you to listen to our sermon⁵ on Matthew 21 from a few months back for some great practicals on confrontation.

Would you pray with me?

Father God, we thank you for your goodness to us. We thank you for your nearness, Immanuel, God with us. We call upon you as the wonderful counselor and ask that you would teach us how to cast our cares upon you. Teach us to go to you with our pain instead of directing it towards others and instead of drowning ourselves in it. Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and we thank You for speaking to us this morning. We ask that You continue to conform us into a people who are a city on a hill, a people who give light to others, and who show the world what you are like. And we pray for more people in our city to be reconciled back to you, God. We pray all these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

As we go to the tables this morning and we remember what Jesus has done for us... The body broken and the blood spilled for us... I just want to read those words from Hebrews over us one more time:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses**, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, **so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**

⁵ <https://citychurchknox.com/sermons/matthew-jesus-prophet-and-provocateur>