



Wisdom Worksheet: Leading the Complainer through Listening (James 1:19)

The Problem: Desire for Security apart from Christ

The Style: Leading with the Mind

The second difficult person is the direct hitter known as the complainer. A complainer whines for at least four reasons: (1) he fears being misunderstood; (2) he focuses on the negative; (3) he fights to be right, seeing issues in life as black and white (right or wrong); and (4) he frustrates his perfectionist self from his unmet, unrealistically high expectations.

Fears being misunderstood

The complainer lives in fear of being misunderstood. Consequently, he often over-describes issues in such detail that he leaves the listeners more confused than before he began to speak.

Focuses on the negative

The complainer focuses on and remembers the negative. Although 90 percent of a person, task, or object might be positive, he focuses on and analyzes the 10 percent that is negative, frequently defining the whole as such. This often discourages those he encounters.

Fights to be right, seeing life-issues as black and white (right or wrong)

The complainer's desire for security comes with an imbedded passion to be right. Consequently, he fights to be mistake-free, creating neat, tidy compartments of right and



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wrong. This compartmentalizing creates boundaries that did not previously exist, often times leaving others feeling compartmentalized as well.

Frustrates his perfectionist self from unmet (often unrealistic) expectations

The complainer is a perfectionist who routinely imposes unrealistic expectations on himself and others. As a result, he is often frustrated and so are those around him.

The Solution: Leading through Listening

In order to lead the complainer, we must listen to his heart—his will, mind, emotions, and spirit. These four chambers of the heart can be discovered by learning his choices, thoughts, feelings, and even his prayers. *Connect with his heart like a Lego* (Prov. 20:5). *Deflect his difficult behavior like a shield* (Prov. 17:9). *Reflect his heart like a mirror* (Prov. 27:19). *Direct him toward wisdom like a highway sign* (Prov. 24:11-12).

Read Luke 5:30-39 to discover how Jesus listened to and led a group of religious complainers who whined about Jesus and His disciples dining with tax collectors and “sinners” at Matthew’s party. Jesus *connected, deflected, reflected, and directed*, implementing four wise practices. He: (1) *comforted*, (2) *encouraged*, (3) *rephrased absolute statements with a question*, and (4) *taught excellence rather than perfection*.

Connect with his heart like a Lego: Comfort (Prov. 16:24; 25:11)

Comforting a complainer means that we come along side him and communicate the words, “I understand.” This short sentence builds an emotional bridge between the complainer’s heart and ours. He is comforted by the connection of understanding which



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opens the door to encouragement. Solomon counseled, *“Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones”* (Prov. 16:24). He went on to say, *“A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver”* (Prov. 25:11).

Jesus comforted complainers (Lk. 5:30-31)

The complaining Pharisees asked why Jesus and His disciples dined with tax collectors and “sinners” (Lk. 5:30). Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, *“It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick”* (Lk. 5:31) communicated that He had understood their perspective. Paul said that our comfort comes from God and is designed to overflow into others (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Next time you encounter a complainer, connect with his heart—his desire for security and his fear of being misunderstood. Comfort him with the phrase, “I understand.” Follow these words with describing an experience in your own life that is similar to the complainer’s scenario.

Deflect his difficult behavior like a Shield: *Encourage* (1 Thess. 5:14; Prov. 12:25; 15:23)

Encouraging the complainer means that we reveal the positive in the situation, breathing life into his heart. In essence, we offer hope. Shifting his focus from the negative to the positive provides an environment for the complainer’s anxiety to change to courage. Paul called those in Thessalonica to encourage the timid, those who focused on the negative (1 Thess. 5:14). Proverbs records, *“An anxious heart weighs a man*



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down, but a kind word cheers him up” (Prov. 12:25). Listening to and leading the complainer by deflecting his behavior with encouragement—in spite of his negativity—will actually bring us joy (Prov. 15:23).

Jesus encouraged complainers (Lk. 5:32)

The Pharisees were so focused on the negative that they had created 1,500 additional laws to protect followers from breaking the Torah. Jesus encouraged the Pharisees to see the positive with His underlying mission, *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”* (Lk. 5:32).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

After comforting the complainer, deflect his negative behavior and encourage him to see the positive in the situation. The focal point of this positive perspective can center on a person or task. It might capture a unique quality in the complainer or another person involved in the conflict, or focus on a benefit from the task of processing the conflict.

Reflect his heart like a Mirror: *Rephrase absolute statements with a question*
(Col. 4:5-6; Prov. 27:9; 10:21; 14:8)

Because he sees issues as black and white (right or wrong) the complainer fights to be right and is notorious for making absolute statements that leverage the words *always* and *never*. For example, “You *never* call me!” When we listen wisely, we *rephrase an absolute statement in the form of a question*, “Do you really mean *never*?” This gently implies the exaggeration just made by the complainer, causing him to wrestle with his perspective and readjust his statement. Often, he will discover that his desire to



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be objective has led him to be quite subjective. Paul likened this wise kind of response to salt, saying that we should be wise in the way we act toward outsiders so that we may know how to answer everyone (Col 4:5-6). Solomon equated this earnest counsel with the joy that perfume and incense bring to the heart (Prov. 27:9).

Jesus rephrased absolute statements with a question (Lk. 5:33-34)

Jesus rephrased the Pharisees' absolute statement, "*John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking*" (Lk. 5:33) in the form of a question, "*Can you make the guest of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?*" (Lk. 5:34). Jesus was saying that it was the right time to celebrate because God was among them.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Follow comfort and encouragement with reflecting the complainer's heart to be right by rephrasing any absolute statement in the form of a question. Be alert for words like *always* and *never*. Ask, "*Do you really mean always? Do you really mean never?*"

Direct him toward wisdom like a Highway Sign: *Teach excellence rather than perfection (Prov. 20:9; 28:13; 13:14; 24:13-14)*

Teaching excellence rather than perfection to the complainer means that we communicate how God intends us to manage our expectations. *Proverbs*, meaning generally true, most of the time, *teaches* us how to do so. Excellence features two components: *authenticity and wisdom*. The complainer is a frustrated perfectionist, but he is willing to learn. While his high expectations can be beneficial at times, the



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complainer has a blind spot to the fact that everyone and everything except God will fall short. Whereas perfectionism implies flawlessness, *excellence* recognizes (1) *authenticity*: the truth about one's strengths and shortcomings, and (2) *wisdom*: the intersection of God's righteousness with street smarts—shrewdly doing the best with what we have.

Authenticity implies that someone is genuine, or true. We often refer to an authentic person as, “the real thing.” The truth is that no one can say that he is perfect, or without sin (Prov. 20:9). Authenticity demands that we confess our sin to God and others and discover His restorative mercy (Prov. 28:13).

Teaching wisdom is a fountain of life, turning a complainer from the snares of death (Prov. 13:14). Solomon said that wisdom is like honey, sweet to one's soul providing eternal hope for one's future (Prov. 24:13-14).

Jesus taught excellence rather than perfection (Lk. 5:35-39)

In response to the complaining Pharisees, Jesus taught excellence (authenticity and wisdom) versus perfection through a parable about the *old* being unable to contain the *new*. The old, perfectionist, religious system could not hold captive the new, authentic expression of Christ's kingdom in one's heart (Lk. 5:35-39). Someone might say, “Hey, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his disciples to be *perfect* (Matt. 5:48).” Actually, Jesus' statement summarized His invitation to authenticity and wisdom over man-made, religious perfection (Matt. 5:17-48). *Perfect* means *complete*. We are to be *complete* in our love for all, including difficult people (Matt. 5:43-48). This



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completion occurs only when we surrender our hearts to the authenticity and wisdom of Christ.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Comfort, encourage, rephrase any absolute statement in the form of a question, then direct the complainer to excellence—authenticity and wisdom—over perfection. Help the complainer recognize the truth about the situation and wisely readjust his expectations which are thwarted on his audience. Give him a safe place to accurately express his personal strengths and shortcomings and offer wisdom for him to do the best with what he has. Do this by modeling excellence over perfection yourself. Humbly communicate authenticity (your strengths and shortcomings) and wisdom (shrewdly doing the best with what you have) rather than an embellished image of flawlessness.

Summary

We must be careful not to complain ourselves (Phil. 2:14). Follow Jesus' example for listening and leading the complainer: (1) comfort, (2) encourage, (3) rephrase absolute statements in the form of a question, and (4) teach excellence (authenticity and wisdom) rather than perfection. He implemented the wisdom that we glean from Proverbs. It's no wonder that Paul referred to Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).