

Stop complaining, and life becomes more enjoyable

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (RNS)—Last year, Will Bowen gave a sermon challenging listeners not to complain for 21 consecutive days. He handed out purple bracelets as a reminder.

One year later, 4.6 million people in more than 80 countries have taken up the challenge. Bowen's recent book, *A Complaint Free World: How to Stop Complaining and Start Enjoying the Life You Always Wanted*, extols the spiritual virtues of a complaint-free life.

Will Bowen

Bowen, 47, is a minister in Kansas City, Mo., and a former self-described constant complainer. He says 21 days is the length of time it takes to form—or break—a habit.

Q: Where did this idea come from?

A: I was looking for a unique way to get people to focus on what was working in their life as opposed to what was not. Whatever you focus your attention on, you expand or draw to you. And so many people are complaining that they're drawing negative things in their life.

I gave out these little purple silicon bracelets and invited everybody to put them on either wrist, and when they catch themselves complaining, take the bracelet off and switch it to the other wrist, and keep switching it back and forth.

Complaining is like bad breath, you notice it when it comes out of somebody else's mouth, but not your own.

Q: 4.6 million is a lot of people; why do you think it become such a phenomenon?

A: People can agree on two things. One, the world is not the way they'd like it, and two, there's too much complaining going on in the world. In my opinion, there's a correlation between the two.

People think you need to complain to get things done. I invite them to focus beyond the problem, as Martin Luther King did in his "I Have a Dream" speech. He painted a bright vision for all of us. When we can focus beyond the problem, we can effect positive change in our world.

Q: How hard was it for you to reach three consecutive weeks without complaining?

A: Well, it took me about three and a half months, and it takes the average person anywhere from four to eight months.

Q: Were there ever times when you felt you didn't want to do it anymore?

A: Absolutely! But what I noticed was that my church was watching me. Had I not done it and proved that it could be done, then I don't think this

would have taken off. It was kind of like Roger Bannister running the four-minute mile and then all of a sudden, lots of people did it.

Q: Is there ever a good time to complain?

A: Absolutely. The definition of “complain” is to express grief, pain or discontent. And it makes sense to express grief, pain or discontent.

Most people, though, their default setting is griping, myself included. They complain all the time and they don’t realize the damaging effect that complaining has on their health, their relationships, their career and their happiness.

I think it makes sense to complain maybe once a month. But beyond that, it’s really not healthy. If you have a problem, talk directly and only to the person who can resolve the problem. That’s really what I’m advocating—healthy communication.

Q: You link gossiping and criticism to complaining. How so?

A: To me, criticism is just complaining with a sharp edge directed at someone to make them feel bad. There’s no problem with gossip. You can gossip all you want, but there’s two criterion: No. 1, what you’re saying has to be positive about the person, and No. 2, you have to be willing to say it in the exact same intonation if the person were standing in the room. And most people say that takes all the fun out of it. I say then, “Well, you’re complaining.”

Q: What are the spiritual benefits of not complaining?

A: Peace of mind. I think that’s the one thing we’re all looking for.

Q: You say not complaining can lead to a successful, happy and lucrative life. But there are plenty of poor people who don’t complain, and rich people who do. So, which is it?

A: If a person is wealthy and complaining, then that doesn't necessarily mean they have prosperity as I define it, which is having health, relationships that work, a life path or a life career that they love and find fulfilling.

And for a person who is poor, I think the fastest way to get out of it is to begin to be grateful. The opposite of complaining is gratitude. Begin to focus on what you are grateful for and to accept that you have an opportunity to create a different reality for yourself.

Bracelets are available at www.acomplaintfreeworld.org.