

“One Is the Loneliest Number”

Ecclesiastes 4:7-16

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 4. In the place where I grew up, there is a community known as ‘Enola.’ I attended school on ‘Enola’ Road. Anita and I met while working at a summer camp, and the camp was located in the ‘Enola’ community. I recently discovered the history of that place. You've heard of the ‘Enola Gay’ which was the famous bomber plane that flew in WWII. It was named after the mother of one of the pilots. Well, the Enola community near where I grew up was named by a person who lived there all by themselves. They named the place ‘Enola’ because it is ‘Alone’ spelled backwards.

The word ‘alone’ means unaccompanied, solitary, and without companions. It is a contraction of two words, ‘all’ and ‘one.’ To be alone means that you are all by yourself. And, as the song says, one most certainly is the loneliest number.

This passage we’ve come to in our study of Ecclesiastes is a wonderful treatment on the importance of friendship and the value that other people bring to our lives. For the past couple of chapters, Solomon has been weighing life in the balance. He has considered life ‘under the sun’ and has come to the conclusion that apart from God it all seems so empty. He found injustice under the sun where there ought to have been righteousness. He found emptiness where there ought to have been satisfaction. In the opening verses of chapter four, he contrasts the industrious man with the idle man. Now, he is going to take a look at the independent and isolated man.

Warren Wiersbe—“*The industrious man thinks that money will bring him peace, but he has no time to enjoy it. The idle man thinks that doing nothing will bring him peace, but his lifestyle only destroys him.*”

The independent man thinks that he doesn't need anyone else in life, but he doesn't realize just how impoverished he is without others. Solomon describes the person who had no one else to help him, nor did he desire help. He was so busy making a living that he neglected to make a life. And when the time comes for him to die, he is surrounded by no one. He is all alone.

Sadly, the one the Preacher describes never stopped long enough to consider what is most important in life. His eyes were always on the next paycheck, the next promotion, the next possession, and he never stopped to value people.

Thomas Aquinas—*“Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious.”*

Have you stopped to consider how relationships are part of the way that God brings joy to our lives? I've heard this statement before, “The world would be a great place if it weren't for people.” It would also be a very lonely place. I can't imagine a world without people. I don't even want to imagine a world without other people. We are relational beings, and we've been wired that way by our Creator. Without other people in your life, it won't be very long before you start talking to a volleyball named Wilson...

(Those of you who are Tom Hanks fans will appreciate that cultural reference ;-)

From the text, I want to give you some principles that you ought to keep in the forefront of your mind. These are principles that ought to undergird and influence all of your decisions, especially as they relate to others.

1. RELATIONSHIPS are more valuable than riches (4:7-8)

“Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’ This also is vanity and an unhappy business.”

Notice the Preacher once more says, “Again, I saw vanity under the sun.” It is his way of making an argument and presenting us with the facts as he saw them. Well, what did he see? He tells us that he saw...

One who is isolated from other people

Solomon says, “When I looked around under the sun, I saw the person who had no one else, yet there was no end to all his labor.” He is describing the person who is alone, the one who is isolated from others. He has no other, either son or brother. The idea is that he has no one who is close to him with whom he can share life.

This is the profile of the one who works only for himself rather than for the blessing or benefit of those around him. There is no end to his work. From morning to evening, he burns the candle at both ends merely to advance himself. In my mind, I imagine old Ebenezer Scrooge sitting at his table, counting his money, with no one else in his life.

It is the miser who is never satisfied that Solomon has in mind here, the money-maker, the gold-chaser.

One who is confused about true priority

Solomon says, “Even though this person was all alone, he was unceasing in his labor, his eyes were never satisfied with riches.” In other words, this is the one who has lost sight of what truly matters in life. This is the person who is ignorant of true priority. He fails to understand that there is something far more valuable than gold, something far more precious than the American dream.

illus. of young couples waiting longer to have children

Philip Ryken—“*No matter what he gained, the man had no one with whom to share it. He was working too hard to make any friends or to start a family.*”

Apparently the man did not even take the time to stop and ask himself what he was doing with his life. Here he was, making costly sacrifices to advance his career and build up his bank account, yet never even considering whether it was all worth it.”

His possessions couldn't satisfy his soul. (see Luke 12)

The principle is this—relationships are more valuable than riches. You can spend your life trying to attain wealth, or trying to live the good life, only to miss out on what's truly valuable. I have yet to meet a person who wanted to be surrounded by his money while on his deathbed. I've never heard of anyone ask for his business portfolio while dying. No, when life and death stare you in the face, it has a way of stripping you of all that doesn't matter.

One who is missing out on real pleasure

Solomon says of this guy, “He never asks, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’” He says that to elevate riches over relationships is an empty pursuit, or an ‘unhappy business.’ Literally, he says that it is a grievous task. It misses out on true joy in life.

Are you a happy person? If not, maybe you need to stop and evaluate what you are making priority. It could be that you are missing out on joy because you have forgotten where it comes from in the first place. And so what the Preacher says here serves as a real warning for us against isolating ourselves from others and giving ourselves over to selfishness and greed.

2. PEOPLE are more important than projects (4:9-12)

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how

can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Not only does the Preacher tell us that relationships are more valuable than riches, but notice also how people are more important than projects. It becomes all too easy for us to value what we do over who we are. We function as human doings rather than human beings. Those who are ‘task’ oriented types perhaps will have to work harder at cultivating the relationships they have with others.

Goals, deadlines, and quotas can eclipse the things in life that truly matter the most if we are not careful!

Look at what Solomon says in verse 9: “Two are better than one.” And he will go down the list and give us some specific examples of how this is true. (Wiersbe)

Working

The first example involves work. Notice the word ‘toil’ used there in verse 9. Work is a part of life, yet Solomon tells us that two are better than one when it comes to working because two workers can get more done than one working by himself. Two workers have a ‘good reward’ on their toil when they tackle a project together. It is more rewarding.

We are more productive and can accomplish more with others in our lives rather than simply going at it alone.

Walking

Solomon then tells us that two are better than one when it comes to walking. When two are walking together, if one falls, he has another to help him up. Woe to the one who has no one to help him back up when he falls!

Can you imagine falling down and not having anyone else around to help you back up? I know that physically speaking, especially for those of you who are

older, this is a frightening thought. But to press the metaphor a bit, what about those who fall spiritually? Let's just be honest—there are times when life knocks us down. Like a Mack truck out of nowhere, life has a way of plowing us over and putting us flat on our back. Sometimes we trip over our own two feet. We make bad decisions. We get out of the will of God. Or we try something and end up failing at it, or relationships get broken, or financial burdens bring us to the end of our rope.

The Preacher reminds us just how important other people are in our lives as he says, "Woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"

There is a tendency for us to shut others out when we get into a pinch. We think we need to be tough, macho, and we dare not let someone else know we're struggling. We have to perpetuate the image that we've got it all together.

David Smith—*"Within each man there is a dark castle with a fierce dragon to guard the gate. The castle contains a lonely self, a self most men have suppressed, a self they are afraid to show. Instead they present an armored knight and no one is invited into the castle."*

Woe to the one who falls and doesn't have another!

Warming

Next, Solomon tells us that two are better than one when it comes to warmth. Perhaps more than any, this pictures the value of the marriage relationship. Yet the implications of what he says are wider than just marriage. In those days, two travelers camping out, or even staying in the courtyard of a public inn, would feel the cold of the middle eastern night and need to travel close to one another for warmth for comfort's sake.

Two could sleep back to back and stay warm all night. Like Bubba and Forrest, they lean on each other and keep their heads out of the mud!

The idea is that we need others during our most vulnerable moments. We need another when there are elements around us that we can't change. Left all alone, we are exposed, unguarded, and vulnerable. We need others for warmth. I think about how this so appropriately applies to the church. We ought to have a warming effect on each other. We ought to draw strength from one another and encourage one another. The New Testament knows nothing of isolated Christian experience.

There is spiritual warmth in going through life with other Christian brothers and sisters. Let me tell you, it is easy to grow cold in the Christian life. The first step is always a withdrawal from other Christians. You can become numb and calloused in your heart, uninvolved in the work of God and spiritually adrift. That's why the heat of others can help to warm you up. I need others for fellowship and fire.

Watching

And then notice Solomon says that two are better than one when it comes to watching out for one another. It is the idea of safety and protection. It was very dangerous for a person to travel alone. Most people traveled in caravans or groups for safety's sake. There were thieves and robbers who sought opportunity. (see Luke 10:25-37)

Proverbs 11:14—“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”

Proverbs 24:5-6—“A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.”

And so the Preacher begins with one, then he moved to the value of two, and better yet is three. What he says simply highlights the value that other people

bring into our varied experiences of life. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. That is, there is strength when three strands are woven together rather than one single strand all by itself.

3. FRIENDS are more satisfying than fame (4:13-16)

“Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king’s place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

What the Preacher surmised

Perhaps Solomon reaches back into the not so distant past and remembers how his own father was taken from the sheepfold and anointed as Israel’s second king. If that is so, then Saul would have been the old and foolish king that he is referring to. He definitely fits the bill. Saul became so proud that he couldn’t listen to anyone else’s advice. He wasn’t a humble man. He was insecure and suspicious. As David grew more popular, Saul grew more jealous.

And yet the time would even come when David himself would discover how fickle the crowd is. Absalom, his own son, stole their hearts and led a rebellion against his dad.

Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. He says that it is better to be a young and inquisitive kid than to be king who has everything figured out. Better to live with a teachable spirit that appreciates the value and input of those around you than to be lonely and isolated at the top.

What the Preacher saw

In his illustration, a young man unexpectedly rose to power, taking the place of the king who ruled before him. Though he had been born in poverty, he rose to the highest office in the land. This new king ruled over a vast empire. There seemed to be no end to the people who followed him. Yet even he would not rule forever. The time would come when this king and every other will one day be forgotten.

The principle here is that fame and popularity is fleeting. It will not last. It fades like the morning fog. Better to have a few friends with whom you can enjoy life than to have everyone know your name but not really care who you are.

The point is this—no matter how popular someone is, the day will come when someone else takes his place and all his glory fades away. In the end, everyone turns out to be expendable and replaceable. Wow.

A couple of years ago, I remember seeing a Nationwide insurance commercial that featured M.C. Hammer. It had he and his dancers in parachute pants, dancing to the tune of Can't Touch This. They're out in front of his mansion. There's a sports car in the driveway. Then the commercial says, "Fifteen Minutes Later." All of a sudden, the dancers are gone. Hammer is sitting there all alone. There's a foreclosure sign in the yard. They've repo-ed his car. The point is that eventually everyone's fifteen minutes of fame will one day be up. And that's the same thing Solomon is telling us here in this passage.

Relationships are more valuable than riches, people are more important than projects, and friends are more satisfying than fame. One is a lonely number, two are better than one, but a threefold cord is not easily broken.

Proverbs 17:17—“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

Proverbs 18:24—“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Do you have anyone in your life who is truly a friend? Or are you going through life lonely and isolated from others? If so, then know that you don't have to.

One of the insults that was directed at Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees was that He was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. But if He weren't the Friend of sinners, there would be no hope for us. He told His disciples:

John 15:11-15—“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”

Greater love has no one than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends. That is what Jesus did for me and for you at the cross. For all eternity, Father and Son had known perfect joy. Yet at the cross, the Father was pleased to bruise the Son so that sinners like me and you could get in on true joy.

To be saved is to be a friend of God! Imagine that the God of the universe would call me His friend. It is only through a relationship with Jesus Christ, the Friend of sinners, that this is true and certain. The greatest reward of all comes when we yield our lives to Him, when we're yoked up with Him, depending daily upon His grace and strength to empower us for every impossible task all for His glory.

Philip Ryken—*“When our hearts are cold, Jesus wraps us in the arms of His love to warm us up again. When we fall down, He picks us up, reminding us that our sins really are forgiven and that by the power of the Holy Spirit He can help*

us stand. When we are in desperate danger, fighting against the very powers of Hell, Jesus defends us and rescues us—not just by His death, but also by the power of His eternal life.”

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!*

*What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.*

*Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.*