

The Benefit of Fellowship

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; I Thessalonians 5:11

In the beginning it was like mixing water and vinegar. They didn't seem to go together or fit. One was a relic of the past, a left-over remnant of days gone by. The other was an icon of the future, the hope of a new day. It was near toxic. Selfishness, jealousy, misunderstanding, and mistrust fueled the growing tension between them. Over time and because of a series of misfortunes, those attitudes shifted and began to erode away. Their two seemingly incompatible worlds were brought together as they realized the importance of their need for one another. In the end, Cowboy Woody and Spaceman Buzz Lightyear forged an inseparable bond of friendship that would carry them through thick and thin and might I add two more Toy Story movies.

In a 1642 sermon by the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, John Donne stated that "no man is an island" meaning that no one in the world can exist alone. It expresses the idea that we as humans do badly when we are isolated from others. Donne wanted to convey in his message that people are connected to each other. That connection is for the wellbeing of each person. In his sermon, he went on to say that when you hear the church bell tolling for someone who has died, don't ask who it is, just know that it is also tolling for you because you are part of the same body. That point speaks to last week's message that when one part suffers, we all suffer, and when one part is honored, we all rejoice. We are created not for independence but for interdependence. We need each other. The same goes for God. We are not independent from God, but interdependent on God.

And that brings us to our first passage today found in **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12**. From there we will look at **I Thessalonians 5:11**.

For context, follow with me beginning in **verse 1**. **Ecclesiastes 4:1-12**.

Over this section, a heading in my study Bible reads "oppression, toil, and friendlessness." As the writer,

identified as the teacher, looks around, he has been watching the oppressed. There is an overwhelming sense of sadness. They are tearful and I ask myself what has brought them to this place of grief? Why are they so sad? What has brought on the tears? His dismay is twofold. The teacher says that those he is observing are oppressed. If they are oppressed, then it stands to reason that there is an oppressor, an overlord or task master of something that is treating them with a heavy hand. Think of the task masters in Egypt driving the Israelites in their daily labor relentlessly pushing them to the point of exhaustion. There is no ease to either their toil, misery, or pain. Theirs is a bitter life that results in tears.

The second reason for their tears is that they have no comforter. Please notice that the teacher did not use the term comfort, a term that implies ease, luxury, relief, well-being, security or relaxation. Instead, he chose the word comforter. He is speaking of the absence of a person, someone who is a consoler or reliever in times of turmoil. We will talk more about that word comforter when we look at I Thessalonians. But suffice it to say that as the teacher observed those who were being oppressed, they were comfortless. There was no one alongside them in their oppression. They felt powerless to stand against the oppressor because they were alone, isolated. Perhaps they felt abandoned and deserted, hence the tears.

Such feelings of aloneness result in feelings of abject sadness. The taste of life is bitter and cruel. The teacher says that without a comforter the dead have it better than the living because their suffering has ended. He even goes on to say that those not yet born have it far better than both the living and the dead because they have not experienced the heartache of oppression, the pain of hardship or the tears of agony. Without a comforter, without someone to cry out to for help, life is meaningless.

The message conveyed by the teacher is that the life not centered on God is meaningless, purposeless. Without God, nothing will satisfy, even though we think it will. This brings us to our text in **verses 9-12** where we notice the purpose for fellowship.

I. THE PURPOSE FOR FELLOWSHIP – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

As we continue in our series on fellowship, I hope that it is abundantly clear that it can be easy to mask the pain that we sometimes feel while we paint on fake smiles and false platitudes. You may come through the doors of this church or any church, be surrounded by others smiling and chatting about news since the last time you had seen or spoken to others the previous week, yet you or they may be filled with the pain and heartache of unknown or unshared circumstances that make you feel much like those the teacher describes in the opening verses of this chapter – oppressed, alone, and inwardly tearful.

We do well at rejoicing with those who rejoice but can find it difficult to weep those who weep, those whose cares are too heavy to bear alone. We may find it difficult to open up regarding our struggles for fear of being judged, criticized, or worse, ostracized. We may find it embarrassing to admit that we struggle wanting to give the impression that all is well in Neverland. So we bury them because we don't want to hurt or be hurt with Christian cliches that roll off the tongue yet offer little comfort to ease our pain.

Donald Bubna writes in his book *Building People through a caring sharing fellowship* that only as people respond to the need of someone hurting can that person come to truly know and understand that God loves them.

It's been said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Bubna continues by stating that “the function of the true church exists here on earth to demonstrate God's love in a way that can be understood and experienced by all who long to know Him.”

So as we look first at **verse 9**, we see the teacher's reason for fellowship.

A. The Reason For Fellowship – v. 9

Fellowship has a purpose. Our Constitution gives a

purpose or reason for our existence.

“Fellowship Bible Church is organized specifically for the God-honoring purpose of the edification of believers from God's Holy Word, the Bible, the evangelism of non-believers through the Gospel of God's saving grace, and the fellowship of its members through worship, preaching/teaching, and Christ-centered activities.”

A person who comes to our church for the first time should be able to read that and get an overview of who we are, what we do, and infer what we believe.

We gather to learn and encourage each other. We state the source of our learning and encouragement. It is the Bible. It's not *Moby Dick*, *The Iliad* or *Lord of the Rings*. We aren't a book club that meets to discuss the latest book by a popular author or to discuss new teachings on philosophy. In Paul's day, the Greeks did that so they could talk and debate new ideas being bantered about.

We don't meet to discuss politics.

We aren't a social club.

We don't exist to sell a product, field a sports team, or entertain the public.

We meet to discuss the Bible and how it relates to everyday life to learn and encourage each other.

Our purpose is also to share our faith with others so that they can be confronted with sin and God's remedy for sin through His Son Jesus Christ, to show them that there is an answer for the evil that is in the world because of man's free will to choose.

Our purpose for existence doesn't end with those two reasons. We also exist to gather together on the one hand to worship God and on the other hand to have some fun, to enjoy each other's company through a variety of activities that we hope generate growing friendships that encourage each other. Fellowship is an all-encompassing term.

In **verse 9**, the teacher offers a reason for fellowship. Remember that fellowship literally means sharing together. In other words, fellowship takes two or more people to happen. Without fellowship, it can be easy to become disillusioned

and despondent like the person back in **verse 1**. That's why we need each other. The teacher says that **"two are better than one."**

In the context, the reward gained, may be in reference to money or material possessions, but we can apply the principle to spiritual things as well when it comes to the benefit of two working together vs. being alone. In **verse 9**, the teacher says there is a benefit for two vs. one. They have a greater return or reward for their labor. Now you might say, wait a minute, how can there be a greater reward if two people have to equally share the profits? In your mind you might be thinking that one person gets to keep it all so why would I agree to bring someone else on and have to give up half?

There is a principle in business called synergy. Synergy is the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations or people to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate efforts.

About 15 years ago, we were driving somewhere when the van ran out of gas. We were stuck right in the middle of an intersection. Fortunately, there was a gas station on the corner. I hopped out and began to push while Robyn steered. It was a struggle. We were barely moving. A man jumped out of his car and began to push with me. It was a lot easier and faster to get the vehicle rolling to its destination with two of us pushing rather than just me.

I well remember my Soph. year in college. In order to go to the national Cross-country meet, our coach set a goal of breaking 28 minutes in the 5 mile run. Every race I was just over 28 minutes. The best I had run was 28:07. Two brothers had already bested the time set by the coach. After the last regular meet, the coach gave me one more chance. I would have to run the course by myself. Whatever the result would determine whether or not I would go to nationals with my two other teammates. It was a Saturday morning and some of my friends came out to cheer me on. The coach hollered go and I was off. I settled into a rhythm. The course was laid out around the perimeter of the campus and went around the block in Grand Rapids along the

sidewalk and roads. One section on the backside was a two-lane road and up pulled my brother and a few of my friends. They were going to set my pace with the car. They meant well and in hindsight I wish I had accepted their offer, but I told them that if they stayed with me, I would stop. I told them this was something I needed to do on my own. So they drove off. Now in case you are wondering, yes, I did break the 28-minute mark which led to the most grueling two weeks of training I ever ran.

My point is this, we need each other to help run life's race because the synergy we gain through the companionship lifts us up. There is a greater reward through the victory we gain when working together.

I have stood many times at the end of the driveway shoveling snow that plows have dumped when clearing the road. It can be two or three feet of packed snow. As I labor shoveling I watch trucks with snowplows drive by and I honestly wish one of them would feel sorry for me enough to stop and make a couple passes to clear the end of the drive.

It can be discouraging when facing a daunting life situation when you feel you have to deal with it alone. How great it is to have a partner and friend to help in the struggle. No one can go it alone. No one can be independent. Two are better than one.

John Milton, who wrote the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, once stated that **"loneliness is the first thing which God's eye named not good."**

Genesis 2:18 "It is not good for man to be alone." So God created a helper to come alongside Adam.

A Jewish proverb says that a man without friends is like a left hand bereft of the right.

"Two are better than one." That's a good reason for fellowship.

The second point the teacher makes is about the result of fellowship.

B. The Result of Fellowship – vv. 10a, 11a
"If one falls down, his friend can help him up."
"Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm."

Most of you know that about three weeks ago my dad fell. Now dad will be 87 this month. He was going into the house and tripped over a wheel on his walker. Fortunately, someone was in the backyard and heard him. Now, the friend was in his 70's but between the two of them dad was able to get in his wheelchair. Had he been alone, who knows how long he would have lain there?

The roads in Palestine were anything but smooth. They weren't paved. They weren't level. There were rocks. It was easy to stumble and fall.

It's the same when a person falls spiritually. There are all kinds of hazards on the road of life. There is a sound principle found in the New Testament for when someone stumbles and how we can help.

Galatians 6:1-2

When we are facing difficulties of any kind, when there is temptation, when there is hardship, knowing that someone else is there to help us in our time of need when we fall is crucial. Notice please that the teacher doesn't say if someone is about to fall, but rather that the person has already fallen. He's already on the ground.

How many of us parents in teaching our children to ride a bike told them to hop on, have fun but be careful only to turn around and walk back in the house. My guess is that didn't happen. You were right there so that when little Johnnie or Suzie had a spill you helped them back up.

When we fall, and we will, we need Christian friends to help us, friends that won't judge us or criticize us or decide that they have had enough of us and turn their back on us. They won't leave us there on the ground or tell us to suck it up and get back on our feet on our own. They won't tell us to pull on our own bootstraps. That's not a friend. A friend is there to pick us up, dust us off and set us back on the spiritual road again. It doesn't matter if it's inconvenient. As **Galatians 6:1-2** suggests, they help us walk straight by bearing our burdens. Folks, fellowship means we are burden bearers.

Is that you?

I Corinthians 10:13 tells us that we face temptations of various kinds. There is no new temptation under the sun. Someone has already faced the same thing we are facing and Paul says that when we go through temptations God gives us a way of escape. Sometimes that way is through the help of a burden bearer.

Matthew Henry writes "He [who is alone] lies exposed to many temptations which good company and friendship would prevent and help him guard against; he wants that advantage which a man has by the countenance of his friend, as iron has been sharpened by iron... A monastic life then was surely never intended for a state of perfection, nor should those be reckoned the greatest lovers of God who cannot find in their hearts to love anyone else" or who think they can survive by going it alone without God.

When the Romans invaded the Britons, they said of the Britons "while they fight in detached parties, they sacrifice the general cause." Essentially, they were saying that if you separate them into smaller units, they will be defeated.

To defend a weaker member of the herd from an attack, musk oxen will stand in a circle facing outward against the attackers with the weaker one in the middle.

Therein lies our help.
Therein lies our hope.
It is in the strength of partnership.
Therein is the result of fellowship – to be helped up when we fall down.

What, though, is the repercussion without fellowship?

C. The Repercussion Without Fellowship – vv. 10b, 11b

"But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up...how can he keep warm?"

The teacher says we should feel sorry for the person who is alone when he falls. Again, this person has

already stumbled, already hit the ground, already suffered aches and pains from the fall. Unlike the first guy, this person has no support, no one nearby. He is alone and he is to be pitied in this condition. We are to feel sorry for that person. Feeling like you are all alone is a foreboding place and when you fall you can remain there for a long time.

We talk about the Good Samaritan who came to the rescue of the wounded man in the ditch but fail to consider the story from his perspective. How would you like to be that guy laying in the ditch hearing people walk by, even move away to the other side and not stop to help? Maybe he thought the situation was hopeless. Pity that guy. But thankfully there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.

Verse 12 points out the reinforcement in fellowship.

D. The Reinforcement in Fellowship – v. 12

Fellowship is not a spectator sport. We all need to get in the game. Fellowship cannot be an island. You don't run a relay race alone.

Verse 12 insinuates that there is an attacker, someone or something that is out to get you. **I Peter 5:8** says that the devil is lurking about with the intent of devouring someone. He's not looking for a group. He's looking for individuals who are alone. They are easy prey. That's where we find the devil attacking Jesus, out in the wilderness at His weakest moment after He hadn't eaten for 40 days.

We find him attacking Jesus in the garden when He was alone asking the Father to remove the cup. We find him attacking Jesus on the cross when He asked the Father why He had forsaken Him. At times we can even wonder where God is. It's normal. The same principle here is also in **verse 9** – two are better than one.

When we have a friend standing with us, it can be easier to withstand an assault. But where two are good, three is even better. There is a stronger defense. When we stand alone, the likelihood of success is minimal. When we stand with others, success is exponentially increased.

One author suggested that the three chords woven

together refers to you, your friend and the Lord as the third person who provides the strength needed to counter the assault of an enemy. He is the One standing in our fires like He did with Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego. They are bound together, interwoven for durability and strength.

The teacher gives us the purpose for fellowship. Now we turn to the path to fellowship.

II. THE PATH TO FELLOWSHIP – I Thessalonians 5:11

In this verse Paul gives three paths to fellowship. First, the path of fellowship is to be encouraging.

A. The Path of Fellowship Is to Be Encouraging

The KJV uses the term comfort one another. It's the same root word that used when describing the Holy Spirit as our Comforter. It's a word that means to exhort or urge.

John 14:26

II Corinthians 1:3-4 tells us to comfort others with the same comfort we have received from God.

II Corinthians 4:7 says the church was to forgive and comfort someone who had been living in sin.

Ephesians 6:22 and Colossians 4:8 – Tychicus was sent to the church to know how they were doing and encourage their hearts.

I Thessalonians 3:2 – Timothy was sent to spread the Gospel and encourage the believers in the faith.

I Thessalonians 4:18 – When someone dies, we are to encourage one another because of the return of the Lord.

Hebrews 3:13 – we are to encourage one another daily so that we don't become hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 10:25 – we are to regularly meet to encourage one another.

While some have the specific spiritual gift of encouragement, we are all to be encouragers. And everyone of us can use encouragement every day

for something we are going through. We encourage and are encouraged when we meet in assemblies such as this and when we meet in small groups or one on one.

Let's not be hesitant or negligent in giving encouragement remembering that there are three primary means of encouragement: God's Word and its promises, the indwelling Holy Spirit and fellow believers. That's part of our fellowship.

Encouragers give people the benefit of the doubt and are free of prejudice. Barnabas did that with Paul. After his conversion many Christians didn't want anything to do with Saul because he had persecuted the church. They thought he had ulterior motives. Barnabas believed he was a genuine.

Think of the times people have encouraged you or think of times when you needed encouragement and how you felt when no one was there. People in our church are hurting and we need to be encouragers. **Acts 11:22-23** "News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts."

The path of fellowship is to be encouraging.
The path of fellowship is to be edifying.

B. The Path of Fellowship Is to Be Edifying

The NIV has a great translation for the word edify. It's where we get our word edifice, which means a building. Edify means then to build up. It depicts the development of spiritual growth and godly character.

John Phillips says "It implies that spiritual progress results from patient and diligent labor. All believers are to help develop Christian character in others in view of the Lord's return."

When we meet together, we encourage each other to grow in faith. (**Hebrews 10:24-25**)

When we meet together, we encourage each other to grow in hope.

When we meet together, we encourage each other to

love.

When we meet together, we encourage each other to do good works.

That's all part of building each other up.

Alexander MacLaren says "we are all builders building up character."

Scholar W. E. Vine says that "edification is more than just encouragement; it includes any activity that results in more Christlikeness, either in oneself or in another believer." Believer can be edified by personal endeavors of prayer and Bible study, the general sense is that edification, the building up of one another, happens in a group setting.

Christ is our foundation. He is our blueprint for what godly character ought to look like.

Ephesians 4:11-13 says that certain people were given to the church to "prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

What are we doing to edify others along the path of fellowship so that we mature and stand in unity?

There is one final part of the path that Paul mentions here regarding fellowship. The path of fellowship is to be endless.

C. The Path of Fellowship Is to Be Endless

"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

Paul recognized that they had already been engaged in both these positive acts of reinforcing the faith of each other. But he adds - don't stop. Keep it up. The road of life is hard. It's strewn with all kinds of obstacles and hazards and pot holes. We need each other to help navigate dangers, encourage when we are down or defeated and build each other up in Christ like character.

There is a purpose for fellowship with lots of benefits for fellowship. The Bible gives us the path to take. **To what degree are you involved?**