

Better Together

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[0 : 00] Let's pray again. Father, we always need your help whenever we come to your word. We need your word to speak powerfully to us, to challenge us, to correct us, to train us.

So Father, we just pray that you'll soften our hearts now, give us understanding. And don't just give us understanding, Lord, but give us a renewed resolve, one that is inspired by your Holy Spirit to live the way that you want us to, to see the world as you want us to.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. For a number of decades, the UK Centre for Forecasting ran a tracking poll.

Every year they would ask the same set of questions. Do you think the quality of life in Britain is best improved by option number one, looking after the community's interests instead of our own? Or option two, looking after ourselves, which ultimately raises standards for all? Now, before the year 2000, most people chose option number one, put the interests of others ahead of our own.

[1 : 17] But at the turn of the century, that began to change. And by 2006, for the very first time, more people chose option two rather than option one.

That is, it's more important to look after me and myself first. Well, that's the UK, but a number of similar studies in other countries suggest the same kind of trajectory happening as well, including in ours.

And it shouldn't be surprising. After all, for at least half a century now, we've been bombarded with this message. Choose your own path.

Find your purpose. Then do what you want to do as long as it's not illegal. If it makes you happy. You might even have said that to someone yourself.

Don't let others get you down. You've got to take care of yourself first. And notice that this message is all about me. I'm the focus.

[2 : 25] And that's the message we've internalized subconsciously or not. But today, the teacher of Ecclesiastes begs to differ. Now, if you've been following along in this series, you already know that our teacher is something of a scientist.

He's a king. Someone with considerable wealth and power. But he uses his resources to conduct grand experiments of observation.

He wants to observe all of life under the sun. And that's what he does again in chapter 4. In his characteristically blunt way, he paints a series of pictures to show us if everyone puts themselves as number one, all it results is literally a world of pain to make life all about me and never about we is completely destructive.

That's the reality. But remember what I also said in the first sermon in this series. The teacher is not merely a pessimist. The end of this book describes him as someone who wishes to impart wisdom. In fact, he wants to say not just words of wisdom to us, but words of delight as well. And so in chapter 4, he's not just on a mission to tear down our cultural presuppositions.

[3 : 59] He also wants to give us an alternative vision. A vision in which we discover that being number one isn't all that amazing because, actually, two are better than one.

And even better, three is, you know, greater. And so this is how we're going to proceed in today's sermon. Firstly, we'll listen to the teacher's observations of what happens when we make life all about me rather than we.

And secondly, the teacher will teach us that God actually wants life to be about we, not just me. And then we'll wrap things up by reflecting on the chapter as a whole.

So, got that? Let's go. So, firstly, let's listen to the teacher's observations of what happens when we make life all about me, not we.

And he paints for us four rather vivid pictures. Let's look at the first of them, verse 1. Again, I look and saw all the oppressions that was taking place under the sun.

[5 : 16] I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors and they have no comforter. And so this is what the teacher notices as he looks around.

When people decide that it's all about me, not we, oppression results. That's the first picture.

Perhaps he saw what we still see today.

Those in power shamelessly enriching themselves at the expense of those without power. Powerful companies hungrily chasing profits so that top executives can enjoy their luxury houses and luxury holidays while those workers at the bottom can hardly survive on pitiful wages while working in unsafe conditions.

Men in positions of influence using and abusing women for their own sexual gratification while buying their silence with tactics of intimidation.

Perhaps even pastors doing what the prophet Ezekiel once said of bad prophets, that is to whitewash their deeds by false visions and lying divinations.

[6 : 40] Well, this is the world we live in, the teacher says. When everyone wants to be number one, oppression is often the result.

Now, perhaps we experience it on a small rather than a large scale. Like when you encounter playground bullies if you're in school or when you're put in cold storage as a result of office politics. But whether small scale or large scale, well, this is the world that results when we humans live as if it's just about me.

But what is especially devastating about this picture is not just that we find the oppressors boasting, oh, it's all about me. it's that we find the oppressed looking around and saying, it's just me.

I'm on my own. There's no one to champion my cause. There's no one to protect me from harm.

There is no one to comfort me. A world where there is no community to turn to in our time of need, where you can't find anybody to draw strength from, it's a brutal one indeed.

[8 : 03] It's so horrible that we find the teacher making this rather shocking statement in verses 2 and 3 that it would have been better never to have lived than to face such oppression alone.

those are pretty strong words. Some of us might find them uncomfortable. Can you say this in the Bible? And yet, this is not a sentiment that's unique to the teacher.

When faced with intense persecution and isolation, the prophet Jeremiah also wished that he had never been born. and that's because the Bible knows something of what it means to be human in an inhuman world, in a world that dehumanizes others.

The Bible knows that we are deeply relational beings, which means that some of the deepest hurts we can experience are not physical, but relational.

if you've ever had your heart broken, while God's word is tender with you, it says, I know how that feels.

[9 : 22] Or if you've ever been deeply depressed as a result of the way that you've been treated by fellow human beings, well, God understands what that's like. The teacher certainly does.

He sees this world and he is sick at heart. But what lies at the root of such oppression?

Well, the teacher says, let me now paint for you a second picture, one of envy and rivalry, verse 4.

And I saw that all toil and achievements spring from one person's envy of another.

What is it that drives people to work so hard, the teacher asks? Sure, people are sometimes driven by noble reasons, passion, altruism, good old-fashioned diligence.

But the ugly truth, the teacher says, is that more often, it is driven simply by a desire to get ahead of others or to be noticed by others.

[10 : 37] Even three-year-olds display these desires. Child development psychologists once observed little kids building towers, using those building blocks.

The children who finish first, raise their eyes, they smile, and they look triumphantly at the losers.

Those who didn't, they slumped their bodies, they lowered their heads, they didn't make eye contact with the winners.

Envy and rivalry are inbuilt in us from young. And this continues as we grow up. When we are in secondary school, we study hard, but not so much because we genuinely like the subject, but because we want to be number one.

And even parents encourage this. And then this transfers over to our adult life, where we do our best not to fall behind our peers, whether that's in terms of paycheck, or social standing, or achievement.

We work hard so that when we go to the school reunion, we can look around and breathe a sigh of relief if we are similar or perhaps even better than most of our friends.

[12:09] Even in retirement, we work hard to talk up our kids because if they do badly, that reflects badly on us.

things. You see, this is what happens when our world is all about me rather than we. It becomes corrupted by envy and rivalry.

Life becomes a competition. And in this competition, we must be worthy competitors. Otherwise, we worry that we'll be like those little kids who didn't manage to finish building that tower all over again will lower our heads, will feel ashamed.

And so we work hard to make sure that we never experience that shame. We do what it takes so that we won't be perceived as not being good enough, not having enough, or not being acceptable enough.

We want to avoid that at all costs. But the trouble is, often, as a result, we end up using others without a second thought.

[13:33] Perhaps, we don't even realise that we're stepping on others as we concentrate on climbing the ladder. That's how oppression begins.

And the scary thing is, if envy and rivalry is at the root of this, then it's easier for you and I to become an oppressor than we realise.

So what can we do? Well, some people think we should just opt out of working altogether. better. I wonder if you've heard of a recent movement in China called the Lying Flat or Tangping Movement. Now, basically, it's a protest movement where many young workers have quit their jobs in protest of the intense pressure that they feel to outperform their peers.

And they literally lie flat on the couch, I think, doing nothing more than the bare minimum to get by. One of their slogans is, don't buy property, don't buy a car, don't get married, don't have children.

[14:49] Basically, don't do anything. It just exists. But this, the teacher says, is no solution. Verse 5, fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.

You see, the Bible does say that God created work good. Ecclesiastes itself says that work can sometimes be a gift from God, even in a fallen world.

And so it is foolish to abandon work completely. For soon you will have nothing to eat but yourselves. In the Hebrew, verse 5 literally says the fool eats his own flesh.

Proverbs chapter 6 verse 10 to 11 says pretty much the same thing. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a thief, and scarcity like an armed man.

But what's the solution then? In a world driven by envy and rivalry, what can we do? are the only options to work super, super hard to get ahead?

[16:10] Or to say, what's the point? Well, here's some wisdom the teacher says, verse 6. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

to live just for me sounds like you're doing yourself a favor, the teacher says, but it's actually bad for you.

Because if you try to live just for you, you end up constantly rushing from one thing to the next, trying to gain something which you believe will make your tomorrow better.

but all you're doing is feeding your discontentment, trying to grasp something elusive. But what if the teacher says, instead of trying to grab that elusive thing with both hands, you know, your hands are always working to try to get that thing, whatever it is, you decide to let it go instead.

It's not that you're folding your hands like the fool, but your hands are not always scrambling for more. You use one hand to work, yes, but your other hand is at rest.

[17:31] And so, if we were to take verse 6 and apply it to concrete situations, perhaps this is what the teacher will say to you. What if you decide not to work those extra hours just to get ahead or to prove something to others?

What if you stop seeing life as a competition and start seeing it as a God-given present? What if you see what you have been given instead as an opportunity to serve your companions?

friends? Because if you don't, you might end up like the third picture of a seventh. Again, I saw something meaningless under the sun.

There was a man all alone. He had neither son, nor brother. There was no end to his toil, and yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

For whom am I toiling, he asked, and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless, a miserable business.

[18 : 52] Here is a man who is completely driven. He is Mr. Workaholic. Ever met him? He worked hard for decades and decades, perhaps even for his family.

There is no end to his toil. But one day, he finally looked up and there was no one. No friends, no family, nothing.

He had sacrificed them all in pursuit of his work. This is a picture of isolation. He has no one to share the fruits of his labor with.

His toil benefits no one else. once again, we find a world where there is no we, just me. And it's miserable.

And so that's the isolation of the workaholic. And perhaps we kind of expect that. But in the fourth picture, the teacher gives us a more surprising take.

[19 : 59] The isolation of the successful. that's in verses 13 to 16. Now, following this particular story is slightly difficult.

And I understand that the verses are not straightforward to translate, which is why the phrasing can be a little bit different when you look at different English translations. But here is the basic gist.

There is a young man who, although he was born in poverty or thrown into prison, he eventually ascended to become king.

Think of someone who is a little bit like Joseph in the Old Testament. And he replaces a king who has grown isolated in his old age, refusing even to take advice.

And here's the good news. This young guy is a wise man. And even better, he seems to have plenty of followers, supporters. So here is someone who isn't just about me, he has a we.

[21 : 08] But it doesn't last. Eventually, the crowds decide that there is someone better, someone better to support, someone better to follow, and they leave him.

And so he too becomes isolated. That's how the world works, doesn't it? The teacher says. Just look at Malaysian politics.

Perhaps a reformist movement starts. It might even have a guy leading it who is genuinely good and wise. He might even get to the top and become prime minister.

But soon people start swaying and they begin to switch allegiances and hot parties. And the new leader becomes isolated. Now he might even genuinely do good things during his time in office.

But soon he's gone and before long even his reign of wisdom will not be remembered. No wonder the teacher says all this is hebal, fleeting, enigmatic.

[22 : 15] You see, if you make your life all about you, yes, there is a possibility that you might get your day in the sun.

But it won't be remembered. It won't be known in the long term. This is the world we live in. The sooner we accept this reality, the better.

So what can we do? What should we make of all these observations that the teacher has given us? Should we just give up? Well, no, the teacher says.

Because in the midst of all these bleak pictures, he paints one rather different picture. And in this picture, the teacher will teach us that God actually wants life to be all about we, not just me.

And you know what? Whenever we experience life as a we, not just me, we discover that it's actually a real gift to be enjoyed. You see, we already know this instinctively, don't we?

[23 : 35] Consider what many modern people long for. Now, one of the things they long for is something that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. On the one hand, we want autonomy.

Now, that is just a fancy word for saying that we alone want to determine what kind of life we can live. Only we should decide that.

Only we can define ourselves. No one else can. You do you. You figure out what you want in life, and then you chase your dreams. No one else can stop you.

So on the one hand, we want autonomy. autonomy. But on the other hand, so many of us modern people long at the same time for connection.

We want to be known by others, to draw their affirmation, indeed to get the sense that others take pleasure in who we are.

[24 : 36] we want to be in someone's presence and not feel shame or judge. Indeed, we long to be in the company of those who help us to feel seen, safe, and secure.

Our brother Pauling and I were chatting a few months ago about Kuching, and he mentioned that based on some surveys that he's done and some people he's talked to that Kuching can actually be a pretty lonely city.

For a surprising number of young adults, life is simply about getting up at 7am Monday, work till 5pm, go home and watch TV, and then weekends are just running errands, resting maybe, and then going to see your friends with whom you have superficial conversations.

And many of them want something more. And that is not surprising, the teacher says, because that is what we were made for.

God designed us for connection, not autonomy. Everyone longs to know and be known.

[25 : 58] The Christian psychologist Kurt Thompson says that every baby comes into the world looking for someone who is looking for him or her.

And that's why the teacher says, verse 9, two are better than one. We were made for connection. Perhaps there's an echo of Genesis 2 there, where we remember how God said, it is not good for man to be alone.

perhaps that's why verses 9 to 12 is such a popular reading at weddings. But it's really important to notice that the teacher is not talking about romantic love or marriage here, although what he says applies to those relationships too.

He's not saying that two is the magic number, because notice in verse 12, he goes on to talk about three. So clearly we're not talking about marriage here.

So when I say that God actually wants our lives to be about we, not me, I'm not actually talking about coupling up. I'm not saying that God says singlehood is second rate.

[27 : 13] Please don't hear me saying that at all. Rather, what we're talking about first and foremost here are friendships. And God says a world where you have strong friendships is a world in which you can live in, even enjoy, even if it is presently broken.

Why? Because notice what sort of return you get. Verse 10, if either of them falls down, one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. You see, the teacher knows what sort of world we live in.

How could he not base on all the observations he made? And he knows that we live in a world where we can be knocked down and swept off our feet. He knows we live in a world where it can feel like a wilderness at times.

[28 : 27] And there are many chilly nights. He knows we live in a world where there are enemies. But where there is a we instead of just me, there is blessing to be found.

Because now there is someone who can help you get back up when you are oppressed. There is someone who can be with you when you are feeling isolated. there is someone who will stand with you instead of envying you and trying to break you down.

What a gift that is. If we have it. But this raises the uncomfortable question. Do we have this gift? Perhaps we think we do if we base it on the number of contacts contacts on our phones or the number of people who know my name. But my old pastor Von Roberts once made this insightful observation.

It's possible, he says, to have proximity without community and communication without intimacy. After all, even allowing for social distancing, there is plenty of proximity in this hall right now.

[29 : 46] We're all reasonably close, physically speaking, to one another. Certainly closer than if we were just on Zoom or Facebook. But does that necessarily mean that we are relationally closer?

Similarly, thanks to the tools that we have, we are all immersed in communication. Every day, we get plenty of WhatsApp messages, plenty of photos, plenty of videos.

But does all that communication equal to intimacy? I think we all know the answer to that. So what should we do?

How can we take all the words of Ecclesiastes chapter 4, especially verses 9 to 12, and let it guide our very existence here and now? Well, let me offer three big picture reflections to try to give Ecclesiastes chapter 4 room to speak into our lives today.

So firstly, Ecclesiastes 4 teaches us that any attempt to make this world about me rather than we is a totally futile effort.

[31 : 06] Matthew Voss is a sociologist who teaches a Christian college. And on the first day of class, he usually gets a couple of volunteers and he asks them to publicly introduce themselves.

They go to the front of the class and say a few words. Sounds simple, right? But there's a catch. The students who volunteer cannot make any reference to any group of which they are part of. And so what happens, not surprisingly, is that the first student, she gets up, she goes to the front and she starts by saying her name, I'm so-and-so. And at this point, Voss stops her and says, hey, you can't do that because your very name ties you to a family, which is one of the most important groups to which you belong.

I hope you're beginning to see where this is going. And so usually the student, you know, she tries to find something to say and she still struggles to say anything that doesn't tie him or her to some larger group.

Now, Voss eventually lets them introduce themselves freely, referring to any group they like. And so now they can talk freely about, you know, which family they're from, which team they used to play on when they were in school, how a mission trip changed their lives, etc.

[32 : 29] What was the point Voss wanted to make? It's this. We simply find it virtually impossible to talk about whom we love or what we love without referring to other people.

Even our so-called personal experiences and emotions are usually inseparable from our connection and relationships with others. There is no way of defining ourselves independently of our family or our heritage.

That's how God made this world, one in which we are necessarily interdependent and not independent of each other. And we will be much happier once we stop trying to challenge that. So stop thinking purely in terms of just me. Secondly, if God intends for this world to be we, not me, as Ecclesiastes 4 shows, then the Christian community is where we should see the clearest expression of that reality.

If God intends for this world to be we and not just me, then the Christian community is where we should see the clearest expression of that reality. At the Last Supper, before Jesus goes to the cross, Jesus eats with his disciples and he teaches them one more time.

[34 : 02] And one of the things he says is this on the screen, John 13. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Now think carefully about what Jesus is saying. He's saying, if a non-Christian were to walk into church today, there might even be one or two of you here this morning, how would he know that Jesus is with us?

How will he know Jesus himself? Now we might assume it's going to be the powerful preaching or the amazing worship that will show him we belong to Jesus.

But Jesus himself says, actually, it's in how you love one another. That's how you show this non-Christian that this community is truly about we.

not just me. And that is the actual indicator God is with us. That's how they will know God is real and not just theoretical.

[35 : 13] So how can the Christian community express that reality of we, not me, not just me? Well, I think the passage that we read as our call to worship this morning, Romans chapter 12, has plenty to say in this regard.

In some ways, it is the New Testament equivalent of Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verse 9 to 12. See, just notice some of the things it says, Romans chapter 12, verse 10.

Be devoted to one another in love. Have real affection for one another. You see, here is the opposite of oppression.

We are to think of how we can support one another, help each other. And love is the key. I know this is not just be devoted to one another, but be devoted to one another in love.

Because, yes, you could serve here in church, you could even be devoted to serving, and you say, oh, that's me being devoted to one another. But you could do it without love.

[36 : 23] But God says that's not the way. Ecclesiastes 4, verse 12 talks about a cord of three strands that are not quickly broken. While in Christ we are bound by something even stronger than just three strands.

We are bound together by the love of Christ. And that love moves us to help each other finish the race in this Hebel world, ensuring that we pick each other up whenever somebody stumbles or even falls.

Come back with me again. Look at Romans 12 verse 10 again. Honor one another above yourselves. Now think about that. Here is the opposite of envy and rivalry.

Because this command is not saying try to gain honour however we can. It is to give honour to others. In fact the ESV puts it this way.

Outdo one another in showing honour. So instead of trying to outdo one another to get ahead, we now compete in highlighting the good in others.

[37 : 41] Now imagine a world where everyone does that. Well that's what the world needs to see in church. Or briefly one more example verse 13.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Now is that not the Apostle Paul simply applying Ecclesiastes 4 verse 10 and 11?

He's saying share resources but not just resources. Share also our lives. That's what hospitality is about. It's interweaving our lives together.

Like the cord of tree strands so that we are comfortable even to lie down together. Share life and don't isolate yourselves.

Now at this point let me address some of my brothers and sisters listening to me right now on Facebook or YouTube. Now I know some of you, many of you have good reasons to stay online.

[38 : 43] That's great. But I also know I can confidently say that some of you don't. You've made church about you, not we.

You're not living out God's vision for church as seen in Ecclesiastes 4 verse 9 to 12 or Romans 12. For how can you be devoted to one another in love, to show honour to others and practice hospitality when you are hiding behind a screen?

How can you show that two are better than one? And if you fall down, who is there to pick you up? Now if that is you, don't ignore God's rebuke.

Don't show him an angry emoji. It is for your good because he knows we are better together. And finally, Ecclesiastes 4 drives us to plead with God for a deeper grasp of the gospel.

Now ponder again on all these verses that we've just heard. And I think most of us would be attracted to a community that takes these verses seriously.

[39 : 59] But we know that it's much easier said than done. Even the early church found it hard. Often we look at Acts 2 where the early church is described as being devoted to the word and to fellowship and we think, oh, how great it was.

But we forget Acts chapter 6 where there is complaining and potential division. And so how can such a vision become a concrete reality? well, perhaps the most foundational thing we can do is to ask God to let the gospel shape our hearts in the deepest ways possible.

It's a prayer that I myself need to make more often. We ask God to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus because remember who it is that we follow. You see, Jesus knows that we have made life all about me.

That's simply what it means to be a sinner. But Jesus scratched his hand out to us and he said to us, why not make it about we instead? And he backed up his words.

While he was here on earth, Jesus experienced envy from the religious leaders of his day. He experienced oppression as he was falsely accused by the very people who should have known better.

[41 : 25] He experienced isolation as he was abandoned by his closest friends and mocked while he hung on the cross. No one was there to keep him warm.

No one was there to defend him. But God did this because God's desire is for us to live in communion with him.

God knows that we long to be truly known and accepted and he says that in Christ we can truly be known and accepted. In Christ he takes pleasure in us being together with him.

Sometimes we forget that we think of the gospel merely as God securing our pardon and that's it. But the gospel goes beyond that. It changes our hearts as we begin to grasp that God really wants

to connect with us.

That God is there to pick us up whenever we fall. That God is there to defend us against Satan's darts of accusation. That God thinks that two are better than one.

[42 : 34] Three is better than two. And the best of all is if there is a multitude of people from every tribe and every tongue who realise that they are loved by God.

You see that's our destination that you realise. Our destination is not just me and God all alone but it is actually God and everybody else who recognises that their collective identity is as part of the redeemed community.

And the degree to which we get that is the degree to which we will be an ecclesiastes for verse 9 to 12 church. church. I've said enough words.

Let's plead with God now to change our hearts. Father, we thank you again for your word, for this blunt and challenging chapter.

Father, you know the kind of world we live in, a world where there is often oppression, envy and rivalry, where there is isolation. And Father, we cry out to you that in this world, we know that we need more than just ourselves.

[44 : 06] We cannot depend on ourselves. So we pray, Lord, and we ask, Lord, that first of all, we come to you and also that we receive your gifts. We thank you that you have not just given us the gift of your son, but you have given us the gift of church.

Help us to live out your vision for church, to be a place where two are better than one, where a cord of tree strands is not quickly broken, where people can keep each other warm and help each other up, and who can defend each other.

So give us all that we need to put that into practice. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.