

Stronger Together (2017)
Being the Church | Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
Southern Hills Baptist Church
June 25, 2017

WELCOME

Happy Sunday to you. I'm glad to be sharing time together in God's Word. We will be in Ecclesiastes 4 this morning so please turn in that direction if you have your Bibles with you. If you don't, there should be a copy of God's Word in one of the seats near you.

INTRODUCTION – The Story that “Brought Being the Church”

Let me briefly remind you why we are in the study that we are in currently. Back in January we got a call that was both unexpected and a future blessing, when the pastor of the church we were renting space from called to inform us that their lease was not getting renewed as the business next door was expanding. The landlord had agreed to give that growing business the space that we rented from New Life. We were told that we would have to be out of the building within 3 months.

Worry Amidst Uncertainty

This of course caused some worry within the hearts of your pastors. 3 months isn't much time to make such a massive transition where we would have to make big decisions. **One of the things that worried us most was how all of this change, uncertainty, and transition would affect the church.** What we didn't want was to see people lose sight of what was really important and who we really are as a people.

- Were we going to be homeless for a while? Yes.
- Were we going to have more questions than answers? Yes.
- Did any of our shifting situations change anything about who we are or who we have been called to be? Not in the slightest.

So in the midst of our changing scenery and situation and amid all of the unanswered questions **we wanted to stop and remember who Southern Hills is** and what it means for us to be the church. We will never be defined by the building we meet in or the time our gathering is held. Rather, we are defined by the call and the mission that God has placed upon us. **This call, this mission needs no building to be carried out, although it helps. What this call and mission needs is a people captivated by their God and committed His call.**

Being the Church

So the last couple of months have been devoted to remembering this call and its blessing. God has given us the blessing of the church and placed you in the church for His glory and your joy.

- We have seen this in the call for us to **Learn God's Word Together**. We are to help each other go deeper in the knowledge of our God, deepening our joy and trust in Him along the way.
- We also saw the blessing of the church in the call to **share life together**. We are there for one another to both rejoice and mourn. We are even here in the mundane to encourage and push one another in love.
- The blessing of the church was also on display in the call for us to **Go Out with the Gospel, as well as to Fight Sin, and even to Serve One Another**.

My Last Week in the Series – Stronger Together

With all of this said, this week is my last week teaching in this series, as I will pick the Gospel of John back up in 2 weeks. So here is what I want to leave you with in our time remembering who Southern Hills is and what it means for us to be the church... **We are Stronger Together. God made you to live in community, specifically a Gospel-Centered community, and you are at your best, your strongest, your most secure, when you are living in that kind of community.**

Ecclesiastes 4 – My Hope for Today

We are going to take time to walk through a passage in just a moment from Ecclesiastes 4. This passage lays out the blessings of living in Gospel-Centered community. **I want you to be reminded of how blessed you are to be a part of the church. I also want you to be reminded of how you need the church in your life, by God's gracious design, to be at your best, to find your deepest joy, to be your most secure.**

Opening Prayer

Before we go any further, let's pause and ask God to bless the study of His Word.

Dear Heavenly Father,

It is you who changes hearts and lives. Your Word is one of the great tools you use. Would you use it this morning to open our eyes to another great tool you use to grow, to mature, to comfort, to encourage, to delight, to uphold us, the tool of the church. By your gracious design, we are stronger together. Help us to see this reality this morning and cling tightly to it for the rest of our lives.

We pray these things in Jesus Name,
Amen.

CONTEXT

Before we read our passage this morning, let me lay out some context. We are in the book of Ecclesiastes and it has been a few years since we have been there last so let me remind you of the backdrop.

Solomon's History

Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, the son of King David. Solomon was a fascinating man. He began his reign by faithfully pursuing God and leading the nation after the law of God. God graciously approached Solomon and asked him, "What would you like?" Solomon could have asked for anything...

- Unending riches that he or his people would never want for anything
- Mighty military strength that Israel would never have to fear an enemy again
- A lifetime of power as King

Or a million other things. Solomon could have literally asked for anything, yet what he asks for is wisdom. He doesn't make this request so that he would be the smartest guy in any room he was in. We read he asked for wisdom that he might rule Israel in a way that pleased God. A surprising move on his part. A God-honoring request. God granted this request and this is why we commonly refer to Solomon as the wisest man who ever lived (apart from Jesus, of course).

Benefiting from Solomon's Wisdom

We still benefit from his wisdom today. We will benefit from it in a moment in the book of Ecclesiastes, but the work Solomon is best known for is the book of Proverbs, a book that has had a far and lasting reach in our world. It is a book that is looked to for wisdom by even those who wouldn't claim Christianity.

Ecclesiastes Overview

Much like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is focused on passing wisdom to others. The wisdom Solomon wants to pass on in this work revolves around the purpose of life. Solomon was looking for a life that mattered, a life of meaning, a life that didn't wind up in vanity or emptiness. In pursuit of this quest Solomon threw himself into a great number of the pleasures that the world offers...

- Wealth
- Possessions
- Fame
- Power
- Sex
- Work
- And others

What Solomon found is that apart from God there is no true meaning in life. All of it is empty when divorced from its Creator and Designer.

Immediate Context

In the passage we will consider this morning Solomon considers the matter of work and pursuing riches. What he discovers is that this pursuit often leaves you alone. He then speaks to the value of community and friendship, which is where our focus will be.

OUR TEXT

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

[9] Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. [10] 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! [11] Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? [12] And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Isaiah 40:8

[8] The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

So this passage was not written about the church, but it does speak to the value of community, friendship, and fellowship. What Solomon describes should be at the heart of the church and relationships therein. Therefore the principles that Solomon writes of are incredibly relevant when speaking of the church. The value Solomon describes concerning friendship and community serves as a powerful reminder that we are Stronger Together.

In this passage Solomon provides **4 reasons why we are Stronger Together**.

1. TOGETHER WE ACCOMPLISH MORE (vs. 9)

We are Stronger Together because Together We Accomplish More. We see this in verse 9...

Ecclesiastes 4:9

[9] Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.

The truth that Solomon puts out here for us is simple. 2 people can accomplish more together than 1 person off on his own.

Habitat for Humanity Illustration

I have had the opportunity to work on some Habitat for Humanity projects in the past. I am sure everyone here is familiar with Habitat for Humanity. It is a great charity that builds homes at very affordable rates for those who wouldn't be able to afford to get into a home without this kind of help. What is beautiful about these projects is that so many people come together to help stand this house up. I mean, it has to work this way. There would be no other way to do it.

Build It By Your Self

Could you imagine if you signed up to work on a Habitat for Humanity project and you showed up to the work site and no one was there. As you walked on to the site you found a letter addressed to you that said, "*Thanks for volunteering. We think you will do a great job at building this house. Let us know when you are done.*" What would you do? I can tell you what I would do... leave. I can't build a house on my own for a number of reasons, but one of them is that two hands simply isn't enough or it would take me years even if I could figure out how to do it on my own.

Not How It Works

Of course this isn't how it works at the Habitat for Humanity work sites. You show up and there is already a large group of people there. Some professionals and some volunteers, but what is clear is that you are not alone. That gives you the confidence to stick around and help, rather than hop back in your car and go home, right?

The Impossible Calling of the Gospel

The calling of the church is a big one. If it was your job and your job alone to ensure that every man, woman, and child in the greater Austin area had heard the Gospel you would probably give up or live in a state of defeat, knowing that you would likely never achieve this goal. Really, the calling of the Christian is bigger than that though. We are to take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth, not just the ends of the greater Austin metro. Talk about an overwhelming task.

Not Alone in the Gospel Call

The good news is that **you are not working alone. God has placed you in a people who are all on this mission together.** We have broken up into little subteams, local expressions of the larger team. What would be impossible on your own is possible with the people, the team, the family that God has placed you in, the church.

Vacation Bible School

Here is a quick illustration that is timely in the life of our church... One person could dream up a Vacation Bible School program to put on for our kids and the kids of our community, but they can't carry it all on their own. They can't teach all of the classes. They can lead all of the crafts. They can't be there to lead every bathroom break. If VBS were left on one person's shoulders it would fall apart. However, when we all pitch in it can all get done. We can accomplish so much more together.

Accomplishing More Together

Now, the calling of the church reaches beyond evangelism, right? This is what we have been talking about the past couple of months. We are called to learn the Word of God, to share life, to give, to fight sin, to serve one another, to pray. **How much more can we accomplish in all of these areas when we are standing beside one another and working towards these common goals?**

We can do so much more together. We are Stronger Together!

Let Me Be Blunt

Let me be kind of blunt for a moment... those who shrug off the necessary role of the church in their lives are either (1) ignorant of the high mission they have been called to, they are unaware of all that God expects of them as followers of Jesus, or (2) arrogant enough to believe they could care for all of this on their own. Let us not be ignorant, brothers and sisters. May we not be arrogant, brothers and sisters. Let us wisely join forces with the people God has called us to, the church, that we may see great things done for His name.

Transition

In the remaining verses we will consider Solomon will illustrate the why and how it is that we are able to accomplish more together.

2. TOGETHER WE HAVE HELP (vs. 10)

The 2nd reason we are Stronger Together is that Together We Have Help.

Ecclesiastes 4:10

[10] 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!

Ever taken a nasty spill before? It sure helps to have someone there to help, doesn't it?

Don't Want Help

One of our problems is that we don't like to get help.

- We like to handle things on our own.
- We can be a proud people.
- We want to be self-made.
- We don't want to owe anyone anything.
- We don't want to be viewed as weak.

Denying Reality

So when we do fall we often deny it to others.

- We tell others that we are fine, when we are panicking on the inside.
- We tell everyone that we have the situation under control when we really don't know what we are going to do next.
- We tell others that we will be ok, when what we really want in that moment is just to talk out our fears and have someone listen and empathize.

Keeping Community at Bay

This kind of pride keeps community at bay. **It denies the gracious offer from God to have brothers and sister help us back on our feet after we had been knocked down.** Solomon says in verse 10, "Woe to him who is alone when he falls." This is why Solomon also writes...

Proverbs 16:18

[18] Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Our pride often brings destruction and a fall as we deny the gracious gift of God in the church.

Junior Seau's Birthday

This is a story that will stick with me. I remember hearing about the death of a football player a few years back. If you follow football, you have heard of him. His name was Junior Seau. He was an incredibly tough and talented athlete. A couple years ago he took his own life. No one know why he did it. There is a lot of speculation that he was very depressed. I heard one of his former teammates in an interview say that Seau was the kind of guy who never showed signs of weakness. When Seau needed to receive treatment from doctors he would hire private doctors who would come out to his house so that his team would never see him in pain or at less than 100%. This teammate went on to describe Seau as a great guy who would always be there for you no matter the situation. He then broke down in tears, crying on national television, saying that Seau had always been there for him, he just wishes Seau would have allowed him to come to his side when he was struggling. Instead of opening up his life and asking for help. Seau continued to try to bear the burdens of life on his own and it all became too much for him to carry one day.

Willing to RECEIVE Help?

The truth is, most of us here are willing to help one another out in times of trouble. **The real question for some of you is, are you willing to receive help?** We will all find ourselves in times of need. There will be times when life hits you hard with what you feared most or just the unexpected and what you had not prepared for.

My Time of Need

You've been there, right? We all need help at times. One of the most impactful examples of this truth playing out in my life came about just 2 years ago. I was putting the final touches on my Easter sermon and started to notice some weird symptoms. Just a few days later a doctor had cut my chest in half, sternum and all and was rewiring my heart, an open-heart surgery known as a quadruple bypass. It was less than a pleasant experience as it left me unable to do the most simple of things for months. I couldn't pick up my kids. I couldn't even lay down on my back. All I could do was sit and wait for the healing to take place and that was going to take some real time.

Who Would Fill the Gap?

This kind of set back left a hole in our family. Who would take care of all the things I couldn't? Rachel, sure, but amazing as she is, could she carry all of this on her own for that whole time? On top of that, the day I came back from the hospital Rachel and Avery were diagnosed with chicken pox, which if you are not aware, getting chicken pox as an adult is like getting a very itchy, bad flu, so Rachel was more than merely under the weather.

We Were Not Alone

The Dawsey family was down for the count. Solomon wrote, "Woe to him who is alone when he falls." Thankfully we were not alone. We live in an amazing community of believers known as Southern Hills. We had so many people helping us get back on our feet by preparing meals, helping clean our home, mowing our lawn, bringing us things we needed, praying with us and for us, encouraging us, people even helped with some of our medical bills.

Fun Fact: The average cost for one night in a hotel in the US is \$123.00. For 6 hours in a cardiac surgical room, just the room and the equipment therein, not the doctors or anything else, that 6 hours will run you \$189,000.00. That is by far the most expensive room I have ever rented.

So Much Help

There were just so many people helping us. **I am not sure how we would have got through that time with out all of you. Not just logistically, but spiritually. This could have completely drained us.** You made it so much easier. It allowed us to focus on healing and honoring God through that trial.

Variety of Help

These are merely illustrations of what Solomon has written. It is a blessing to have brothers and sisters who will help you get up after life has knocked you down. **The help that we offer one another will come in a variety of ways. Sometimes it will look like meeting needs, other times it will look like being there for each other spiritually and emotionally. The help that we offer one another in all its diversity is one of the tools God uses** to strengthen us to stay on track with the larger mission we have been given as the church.

So we are Stronger Together because we are there to help one another.

3. TOGETHER WE HAVE MORE (vs. 11)

The 3rd reason we are Stronger Together is because Together We Have More.

Ecclesiastes 4:11

[11] Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?

The illustration that Solomon uses here is of two people trying to stay warm in the cold. By themselves they continue to get colder, but together, when they huddle up and take advantage of the body warmth they both produce they can stay warm. **The idea is that we all bring resources to the table that we can use to aid in our common mission.**

Call to Serve with God's gifts by God's Varied Grace

This has been a common theme in this series. Just two weeks ago we considered the call to serve one another with gifts we have been given by God's varied grace. **God has uniquely equipped us with gifts, resources, and situations.** We all come to the table with something different and this gifting was meant to be used in the body. As Paul pictures, when we use these gifts to for the glory of God in the body of Christ, we are like a body moving with purpose. **We each play a different, but vital role.**

Habitat for Humanity – Take II – Diverse Skills

I talked earlier about working with Habitat for Humanity. One of the great things about working with that group is that they do a good job of having the right mix of skills in the groups that they form. If you know me well, something you know about me is that I am not exactly handy. I don't exactly build stuff well... or at all for that matter. If someone sent me to do some actual skilled work on a house and I was dumb enough to give it a go it would be one sad, pathetic, ugly, useless result. I fear I would create more work than accomplish. The project managers at the Habitat for Humanity work sites I have been to understand how to ensure a diversity of giftings and skills in each group. So the times I have been I have worked with teams that have people who are good at hanging dry wall, others who

know how to do electrical work, others who could plumb, and still others, like me, who is good at carrying stuff. That is my greatest talent in the field of construction. That is where I shine. 😊

Diversity of Gifting in the Church

The church operates in much of the same way. I won't belabor this as we talked about it a great deal just two weeks ago, we are stronger together, because together...

- We find some who have skills in teaching and working with kids
- We find others who can make guests feel welcome
- There are others who are great at reaching out to folks and building relationship
- There are others who have musical ability
- Others who are natural encouragers
- Others who give generously and sacrificially
- Others who are faithful to pray for the body
- And so on.

We all play different roles in the church and when we come together, striving after the same calling we find ourselves stronger than ever before by God's good design.

4. TOGETHER WE HAVE EACH OTHER'S BACKS (vs. 12a)

The 4th reason we are Stronger Together is because Together We Have Each Other's Backs.

Ecclesiastes 4:12a

[12] And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him

Have you ever walked down a dark, unfamiliar street at night and been afraid? Of course, everyone has. Your level of fear decreases as the number in your group increases, doesn't it? Surely, and the explanation is simple, should some unsavory characters come across your path you know your friends will be there to protect you and you them. The fact that you are there for one another, protecting each other, supporting one another, provides great strength, right?

Fighting Sin

The primary way this applies to the church ties in to something Matthew walked us through a month ago or so. Part of the calling of the church is that we are to Fight Sin Together. We should help each other put off sin and put on righteousness. Peter writes,

1 Peter 5:8

[8] Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Hunted Spiritually from Without and Within

We are being hunted spiritually and the attacks don't only come from without, but from within as desires in our heart begin to form idols. We have to be on guard, but there are times when we let our guard down and leave ourselves susceptible to the attacks of the enemy, we leave our hearts unchecked for ungodly desire to run amuck. It is in these moments that we need brothers and sisters who can speak into our lives and call out where we are straying or taking our

eyes off our Savior in pursuit of something lesser. It is in these moments that we can have one another's backs.

Transition

The point that Solomon has been working towards is a simple one, yet at the same time I can't underline its importance enough. **We are stronger together. This is a message we need etched into our minds and hearts to keep us from wandering from one of God's greatest blessings and safeguards, the church.**

The question I want to put before you now is **whether or not you are tapped into this strength. Are you tapped into the strength of the church?** Let's consider that together with a few points of application from our text.

APPLICATION: LIVING IT OUT

Together We Can Accomplish More

Where are you pitching in? How are you serving on this common mission we have? There are countless ways, some formal, some informal.

- Life Groups
- Set Up/Clean Up
- VBS
- Children's Ministry
- Actively Investing in others

We talked about this just a couple of weeks ago, but **many people come to the church with a consumer mentality, looking for what they can get, rarely considering how they can give.** How do you give, how do you serve in the body? We can accomplish more together, but how are you adding to this here at Southern Hills?

Together We Have Help

We are to be there for one another, to offer help, to meet needs, to lift each other up when one another falls. **Are you ready? Will you be willing to sacrifice your time, your energy, your resources to help others?** This calling will require sacrifice.

Gotta Be Looking, Gotta Be Involved

To do this you have to be looking for needs to meet. You have to know when someone falls to lift them back up. **Are you involved in the lives of others in our body?** Would you know when someone is hurting or needs help?

Attending, But Disengaged

Along those lines, here is a real problem in many churches today. **People go to church like they go to a movie. They go to watch and observe the service, but never to interact with others** around them at more than a superficial level. **They fail to understand or perhaps they even avoid the truth that the church isn't a service. You can attend every Sunday service that is held and not be engaged in the life of the church.** This is the case for many believers, even some of you. You come, exchange pleasantries and smiles, then service is over and you leave to never talk to anyone

else in the body. You are not truly engaged in the life of the church. I don't say this to discourage you, but to warn you, the strength that we have talked about today, you are not fully tapped into it. Loosely, yes, but not fully. How can you meet the needs of others if you don't know much about them more than their name? You can't.

Gotta Be Plugged In

The beauty and goodness of what God is offering you in the church requires that you be plugged in, involved, engaged, invested. You can't sit on the sideline of the church and reap the benefits that have been laid out today.

Ready to be Served?

Let me shift gears back to the topic of helping one another. I asked you if you are ready to serve others and sacrifice to help meet needs, but let me ask you another question, one that will be harder for some of you. **Are you ready to be served and to be helped? This requires humility and many of us are proud.** We don't want others to know we have weaknesses. We don't want to invite people into that part of our lives. Our failures, the places we are overwhelmed, our trials, those are kept in secret. We struggle and are weighed down by the weight of these burdens, but would rather go on being crushed by these struggles than get help by admitting them.

- Do you have accountability in your life or do you justify its absence by telling yourself you can handle whatever comes your way?
- How honest are you with your accountability? Do you share real issues you are working through or surface level issues that allow you to avoid the real stuff?

Help is the Gift of Strength

For those of you who struggle in this regard what I want to encourage you to remember is that getting help from others **isn't a sign of weakness, it is a gift of strength from God and you are never so strong that you should turn away the hand of God offering you a gift.** We are all sinners, we are all broken, we will all need help at times, God is gracious to give it.

CONCLUSION

Let me close us out tonight with a word of encouragement from Solomon in our text. Solomon has laid out a number of different scenarios where one person will find greater strength with another. Two people can accomplish more work than one. Two people can be there for one another and help each other when the other falls. Two people bring more skills and resources than one. Two people can watch each other's backs in ways that one cannot. So two are better than one.

Then Solomon finishes with this remark...

Ecclesiastes 4:12b

[12]... a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Solomon's point here is that 2 are better than 1, but 3 are better than 2. This truth leaves me asking...

- What about 15?
- What about 30?
- What about 60?

Solomon's original context was that of a good friend. As we apply the principles of the truth he taught to the church we see the church offers so much more than a good friendship could. We offer a whole extended family of people who though diverse in background have come together out of a shared love for Jesus. Our love for Jesus draws us to love one another. So here we sit in a room right now, a room of 30 people...

- A room of 30 people that are working towards the mission Jesus has called us to.
- A room of 30 people that here to help one another when someone falls.
- A room of 30 people that is diverse in its gifting and has been drawn together by God's design make a complete body.
- A room of 30 people that will watch each other's backs and strive to fight towards holiness.

So Solomon says 2 are good, but what about 3. I say 3 are good, but what about 30, 60, 100? Praise God for His good gift of the church, a gift meant to strengthen us for deeper joy as we are equipped to live in the calling He has placed on our lives.

LET'S PRAY