

# The Group Factor: Why We Need Each Other

Fourth of six sermons in the “Daniel Plan” series<sup>1</sup>

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- [Hebrews 10:22-25](#) <sup>22</sup>So let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, with hearts that have been purified from a guilty conscience and with bodies washed with clean water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise. <sup>24</sup>Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good. <sup>25</sup>Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer. (Good News translation)
- [John 13:34-35](#) <sup>34</sup>And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup>If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (Good News translation)
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#):

Any red-blooded American hearing today’s message may believe that I am among the most radical people in the country. What I’m about to say is the exact opposite of what you’ve been taught since grade school. A month from today, on the Fourth of July, our nation will celebrate the 241<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, when courageous, civic-minded visionaries put in writing their dream for freedom from the tyranny of being ruled by a far-away monarch. From that day on we have been taught and told that one of the greatest qualities to be sought, and a key to our happiness, is independence – complete self-reliance, “not needin’ nothin’ from nobody.” The tradition of striking out on your own and homesteading, whether in Oklahoma or Alaska or elsewhere, is a demonstration of one’s desire to be completely independent of others. In popular culture song stylists belt out lyrics like “I Gotta Be Me” and “I did it ‘my way.’”

But total independence from all others is not what God intends. God tells us that the key to happiness is not independence but inter-dependence. Community. Belonging to each other. Needing each other. Romans 12:5 confirms that “...in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”<sup>2</sup> Each of us needs others in our lives.

Maybe you’re more comfortable being alone, away from people and their demands, the commotion of crowds. That’s not my personality type, but I know many who prefer the quiet of solitude, and that’s certainly an important way for them to re-charge their batteries. But God wants us to be in community, in relationship with others – to have some small group that we can relate to and answer to and care for *and* be cared for by.

Here are four arguments for why God designed us to be connected with others in some small, meaningful group.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is indebted to the Rev. Rick Warren’s “Daniel Plan” sermon series for a number of the illustrations and points presented here.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:5 New International Version

## **1. We need others to walk with us.**

We may be sitting still right now, but we don't sit still through life. Did you know that the Bible often compares life to a walk? Why? Because you're on a journey. You don't just sit still in life. You're not where you used to be. You're not where you're going to be. That's why we call life a journey; the Christian life is a spiritual walk.

We're not meant to walk through life alone – and this has nothing to do with whether a person is married or single or in a significant relationship or not. We all know single people who have many deep relationships. And sadly, most of us know some married people who are desperately lonely. Being married isn't a guarantee against loneliness. But community is.

You might say, "But what's so wrong about walking alone? I like walking alone. In fact, I prefer it. I set the course, I set the speed." I get that. I've always been a fast walker. But in college when I first started dating my wife, I learned I had to slow down. Her pace wasn't as fast as mine. Of course, now, with her new hip and new knee, for the first time in our lives she's walking faster than me.

I can think of three distinct benefits from walking with others on their road of life, and allowing others to walk with you through your life:

- a) It's safer. (Ever had to walk alone along a lonely road or through a spooky parking deck? How'd that make you feel?)
- b) It's supportive; going through life in the company of a small group of caring people keep you from giving up. Whether you're running a 5K race for a charity, or you're halfway through a 40-day program seeking a healthier lifestyle, when you are with others, it gives you energy to keep going, energy you didn't have on your own.
- c) It's smarter. If you're walking through life by yourself you don't have anybody to go, "We're off the path. We missed it. We've got to get back on the path." There's a popular expression said to be an African proverb: "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."<sup>3</sup> There's nothing wrong with speed, but Life is not a sprint; it's a marathon, and we "go far" when we make the journey with others.

Think about the wagon trains of America's westward expansion – families traveled together because it was safer, supportive, and smarter. Or picture geese as they fly south for the winter. Flying in a V-formation creates a draft actually making it easier for the geese toward the rear of the formation, and the flock is able to fly farther because, working together, the geese take turns flying in various positions in the "V." You'll get farther on your life's journey in the company of others – in a small group. I encourage each of us to develop small groups.

Earlier we heard from Hebrews Chapter 10, "*Let us not give up the habit of meeting together....* [Notice it's a habit. It's something you do all the time.] *Instead, let us encourage one another....*"<sup>4</sup> That ancient author knew that we're created for community, that we provide encouragement to one another when we come together.

Gathering for worship can be a time of encouragement, but even this group is too big for us to get to know each other really, really well. A gathering of this size is more of a crowd. We can enjoy the benefits of community, growing closer, by deliberately seeking deeper friendships

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<sup>3</sup> Reporters and academics have not been able to demonstrate that this proverb originated on the African continent, though they acknowledge that the sentiment expressed is not inconsistent with the norms of many African cultures. <http://jezebel.com/on-the-origin-of-certain-quotable-african-proverbs-1766664089> and <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/07/30/487925796/it-takes-a-village-to-determine-the-origins-of-an-african-proverb>

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 10:25 Good News translation

with a few others here. 1 Peter 4:9 urges, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” The translation in our pew Bibles says it in a way that is sure to grab you: “Open your homes to each other without complaining.”<sup>5</sup> (GNT) Oh, the Bible’s getting personal now, isn’t it? We’re likely to object, “My home is too dirty” or “My home isn’t big enough” or “My home isn’t nice enough” or “Who would want to come together to study the Bible and pray and share with each other at my place?” Actually, if you extended the invitation to people you’d like to get to know better, you’d be surprised. People want someone to walk with them on their life’s journey, and they’re willing to walk with you on yours. We’re made for relationships. God wired us that way: “We need others to walk with us.”

## **2. We also need others to work with us.**

The Bible says God put you on earth to do a certain work that only you can do. Ephesians 2:10 says this “*God made us to do good works, which [God] planned in advance for us to live our lives doing.*” Anytime you use your talents or your abilities to help somebody else there’s a word for that. It’s called *ministry*, or service. All of us are ministers. Not pastors – ministers. You need others to work with you because you can’t do everything, and you can’t do it all by yourself. But each person working with others can accomplish the work God has in mind for you.

When Mary and I used to direct summer church camp, the daily schedule right after breakfast called for camp clean-up. That covered three lodges, a bathhouse, and four cabins plus the grounds. That’s a lot to clean in the twenty minutes allotted for it. But with every counselor and every camper at work on particular chores, an entire camp was spiffed up every day.

Sometimes the work before us looms over us – it’s too much; we can’t imagine being able to succeed. But when we walk through life with others, we can accomplish more than we imagine. On our youth mission trip a few years ago we were working at a food bank in Indianapolis. The facility was a former store – maybe a Super-Kmart or something like that. It was enormous. Our host told us, “I want you to paint the walls of the food bank.” Imagine standing on the pitcher’s mound at Progressive Field and being told, “Paint the wall from home plate all the way around the park.” That’s what the food bank wall looked like. Honestly, I didn’t think we could do it in the 4½ days we had available. It was huge, and there was so much stuff in the way – food, shelving, old desks, display cases. But with about a dozen youth and advisors coming together, we “got ‘er done...” actually much to my surprise. Together we can make a difference if everybody does just a little. As Pastor Rick Warren is fond of saying, “Snowflakes are frail but if enough of them stick together they can stop traffic.”

We need others to walk through life with us and to work alongside us, and also...

## **3. We need others to watch out for us in life.**

The Bible says in Philippians 2:4 “*Look out for one another’s interest, not just your own.*”<sup>6</sup> If you want a counter-cultural verse, that’s it. In our society the pervasive mindset is that everything is about “Me”: my needs, my interests, my wants. Just picture how some people behave in the stores on Black Friday. Think how motorists tend to behave when road construction jams up traffic. This verse doesn’t say to ignore your own interests; but it directs us to look out for the interests of others, too.

We need people watching out for us – not just guarding our stuff when we’re on vacation, but keeping an eye on our emotional and spiritual health, willing to say, “You need to ask God to help you with that; you can’t carry that burden alone.” We need people to watch out

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<sup>5</sup> New International Version and Good News Translation

<sup>6</sup> Good News Translation

for us because we all have “blind spots,” things we can’t see. Someone has to tell you if your car’s taillight is burned out, if the hook on the back of your blouse is unhooked, if your fly’s open, if you have spinach on your teeth. The first verse of Hebrews 13 says “*Keep being concerned about each other as the Lord’s followers should.*”<sup>7</sup> We should care about each other. We’re family. We’re in God’s family. We need people to walk with us and work with us and watch out for us, and...

#### **4. We need others to wait with us and to weep with us.**

There are things we simply shouldn’t have to face alone. Your life will have times of crisis. Tragedy will touch your life. That’s part of living. The waiting can be awful, waiting for news you don’t want to receive. You shouldn’t have to wait alone. And when bad news comes, you shouldn’t have to weep alone, either. We need others who are close to us, who know us, who care about us, who will wait with us and weep with us.

Community is God’s answer to despair. Romans 12:15 says “*Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.*” We do that best in a group. Someone gets a promotion, graduates, has a baby... we celebrate, have a good time! Someone gets tough news from the doctor, finds out their spouse has been downsized out of a job, has their identity stolen, learns of the death of their nephew, we embrace them, sit with them, listen, console, weep with them.

And if you aren’t sure what to do with tears do come, let me suggest two things. First, don’t say, “Don’t cry.” Immediately offering a box of tissues sends the same message – “Don’t cry.” Allow tears to work their emotional and physiological healing power. And second, if tears come, that might be a good time simply to stop and pray. Hold that person in prayer, or allow yourself to be held in prayer by others. Don’t worry about what to say: just say what’s happening, maybe like, “Let’s just stop right now and pray for Stephanie. She just got this news from her sister. Let’s stop and pray for her right now.” ... “Let’s stop and pray for Bob right now. He has given twenty-two years of his life to this corporation and they just laid him off with one week’s notice. And he’s pretty devastated. Let’s pray for Bob right now.” You don’t have to fix anyone’s problem. What they need is to know you sympathize, to know that you’re there, to know they’re not alone.

God wired us to be together, to support one another, as a congregation, yes, but even more in the intimacy of a smaller group of people who are committed to supporting and encouraging each other. Jesus said that it is in offering genuine and generous love for one another that we show that we are Christ’s followers. Connected with a small group of committed brothers or sisters in Christ, we are able to support and encourage each other as we **walk** together through life’s long journey, **work** together to accomplish what we cannot achieve on our own, **watch out** for one another, and **be present** for one another in the **waiting** and **weeping** as well as in the joy and celebration.

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<sup>7</sup> Contemporary English Version