

Start Growing Stronger Together
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We are in a sermon series called Stronger Together. Last week I started preaching on the one-another commands of the Bible. The phrase “one another” is found 100 times in 94 New Testament verses. 47 of those verses give instructions to the church, and 60% of those instructions come from Paul.

When you look at these verses, a few common themes show up:
 One-third of the one-another commands deal with the unity of the church.
 One third of them instruct Christians to love one another.
 About 15% stress an attitude of humility among believers.

These commands are reciprocal, which means that it speaks of actions that are mutual, given by each toward the other. So, you cannot obey the one-another commands without other people. You must be in relationship with others to do the one anothers!

The phrase “love one another” is mentioned 17 times in the New Testament – way more than the other one-another commands.

We’re going to look at some of the other one anothers, but without love, none of them will work. I believe the other one another commands are ways of expressing our love. They are ways we meet each other’s needs. They are the way we grow stronger together.

We will never do the other anothers until we start loving one another. Love is the motivation to obey the one-another commands. 1 John 3:23 says:

This is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us.

You will probably be surprised at the one-another command that has the second most mentions in the New Testament. The command to greet one another is mentioned 5 times in the Bible.

And this is how we Start Growing Stronger Together. That’s the title of my sermon today. Think about it – you won’t build a relationship with someone until you meet them and greet them. Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, and 2 Corinthians 13:12 all say the exact same thing: *Greet one another with a holy kiss.*
 1 Thessalonians 5:26 says *Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.*
 1 Peter 5:14 says *Greet one another with a kiss of love.*

So – we are commanded in the Bible to greet one another. We should not be sitting around waiting for other people to greet us. We all should greet each other.

I don't know why some people think they are exempt from this command. I knew one guy who was upset at church. I asked him what was wrong. He said, "The people here are not friendly and no one ever greets me."

I pointed out that I had recently greeted him. But he said, "Yeah, but no one else did." So I asked him, "So you mean that all these people walked right by you and did not greet you?" "That's right," he said very offended. So I asked, "You mean that people walked right by you and you did not greet them?"

He could not see that it was just as much his responsibility to initiate greeting as it was the other people's. Why is it okay for him not to greet anyone – but he was offended if no one greeted him? The Bible commands all of us to greet one another!

Now – what about this holy kiss part? There are some – like the Amish and Mennonites – who believe we should take this literally and greet one another with a kiss at church.

I studied this out and the Greek word translated "kiss" has several meanings. It means: To greet, welcome, receive joyfully. This greeting can include embracing, kissing or a handshake. It literally means, "to draw to oneself" as in an embrace. In fact, this same word is translated as embrace in Acts 20:1 which says:

Paul called unto him the disciples, and embraced them, and departed for to go into Macedonia.

A kiss or embrace were typical forms of greeting in Bible times. Many people throughout the world still show non-sexual physical affection to those by kisses on one or both cheeks in greetings. Other cultures – like American - prefer a handshake. In Asian cultures it is bowing.

In churches, it can be a hug. Of course – during COVID it's a holy wave!

I don't believe we are under a command to kiss one another – but we are commanded to greet one another with a display of holy affection. Romans 12:10 says:

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.

By the way - that's 2 more one-another commands: be affectionate to one another and honor one another.

The affection mentioned here is a family affection. The Holman Bible says:

Show family affection to one another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor.

The Greek word for family affection is philostorgos (fil-os'-tor-gos); from philos – meaning friend and storge – meaning family love. So – the kind of affection we should have in the Christian family is like the kind of affection that should be shown in families – pure, holy affection.

The word holy is important. A holy kiss was not sexual. In those early times the kiss was a token of peace, friendship, and brotherly love. But the word 'holy' means to be set apart from the common, the ordinary. A holy kiss was different from an ordinary greeting. It belonged to the new family of God's children. The kiss is "holy" in that it is more than just a sign of greeting. A holy kiss between Christians expresses brotherly love and unity.

So – are Christians supposed to greet each other with a holy kiss today? If not, what is a holy kiss to us today? I believe that for us today, a holy kiss is a culturally appropriate, morally pure, physical expression of love for other believers. It's a hand on a shoulder, a warm smile with a handshake, or a friendly hug—a touch that publicly acknowledges our bond with other members of Christ's body. It could even be a holy fist bump or elbow bump!

But the main point is that Christians should feel genuine affection for one another and they should show it! I hate it that during COVID I can't hug you or shake your hand or give you a high five! Doing that is not a legalistic thing that I must obey even though I hate it. NO! It's an expression of my love for you!

Now – on a deeper level - greeting one another is more than just saying hello. Remember, love initiates, builds and maintains relationships! If you want to build relationships, you must start initiating. Relationships don't just happen.

So, how do you make friends so we can start growing stronger together? Let me tell you how not to: just continue to do nothing. Keep waiting for others to greet you or reach out to you.

The fact that the Bible tells us to greet one another means we all need to initiate. That includes you – you need to start greeting. This is more than just saying hello. It means to make someone feel welcome. Love initiates! So, if you want to make friends, you must start initiating.

Here's the big key to what I want to say today: to have friends you must be friendly. Proverbs 18:24 says:

A man who has friends must himself be friendly.

So, the big question is: how do you be friendly? I'm going to show you today. This will not be a profound message, but it will be a practical message. My desire is to impart to you a vision for relationships, the belief that you can make friends and the tools to make friends.

You can do this. Even if you're shy. Some people never initiate conversations because they feel they are not interesting. I'm going to let you in on a big secret. You don't have to be interesting. You just have to be interested.

In other words, you don't have to know a lot about different subjects. If you are truly interested in other people and you get them talking about themselves or what they're interested in, they'll think you are great.

You see, friendship is not so much an issue about how people feel about you; it's about how they feel about themselves when they are around you. If you bring them down or make them feel bad about themselves, they won't want to be around you. But if they get to talk about their favorite subjects, they'll feel great.

All you've got to do is initiate by showing interest, asking questions and caring enough to listen. Try to get into their world. Many people fail here because they won't enter into a conversation about something they are not interested in or don't know anything about. That is totally self-centered.

People who make friends get outside of themselves and care enough about others to let them talk about their interests. I'm going to shock you with this statement, but I believe it is selfish to not have friends. I get that from Proverbs 18:1 which says:

An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends; he defies all sound judgment.

The New Living Translation says –

Unfriendly people care only about themselves...

In order to be friendly, you must get outside of yourself and care about others. Unfriendly people are all wrapped up in themselves. It could even be in a negative sense and they are down on themselves and think no one would like them – but they are still self-focused.

So – to have friends you must focus on others rather than yourself. And your focus must not be on getting other people to be your friend. Your focus must be on you being a friend. Got that? Don't focus on getting friends, but focus on being a friend.

The Bible says that when you are friendly, you will have friends. A friend is someone you know well; someone you are close to and trust. That does not happen immediately or automatically.

It takes intentional steps to go from being an acquaintance to being a friend to being a close friend. But it starts with being friendly. If you are not friendly, you will never have friends.

The word friendly means:

To be kind, pleasant, welcoming, approachable and outgoing
 To show interest in others

Some of you are not approachable or outgoing and you wonder why you have no friends. Or you realize you are not friendly and you have resigned yourself to not having friends.

I'm going to give a huge tip to those of you who are not naturally outgoing or friendly: act friendly. If you act friendly, even if you don't feel friendly, you will eventually become friendly.

How do I know that? Because it happened to me. I'm not a naturally outgoing person. I'm not a natural people person. I'd rather curl up in a corner and read a book than anything else. When I was younger, I prided myself on being needless and not caring what others thought about me. I've since learned that that's an immature, wrong way of thinking. I now know we all need each other.

When I learned that, I had to make myself get outside of myself.
 I had to make myself smile and greet other people.
 I had to act friendly, even when I didn't feel like it.
 At first, it seemed awkward and unnatural.
 Now, I've done it so long that I have become an outgoing friendly person.
 I no longer have to make myself greet people.
 I love it. It's now a big part of who I am.

People make a big deal out of me remembering their names. That's not easy for me. I work at it. I may have to ask someone 3 or 4 times what their name is, but they don't mind. They want me to know their name. Why? It shows I care. You can do the same.

I want us all to start growing stronger together.
 But as much as I want to, I cannot make friends for you.
 I can't make someone like you. All the church can do is provide opportunities for you to meet people. It's up to you to reach out and make friends.

We have church services, fellowships for men and women, special events, opportunities to join ministry teams and on-line small groups.

But if all you do is come to church on Sunday morning, walk in and walk out without greeting anyone, you will not develop friendships. You must take advantage of an opportunity to get in a small group.

Some people think they need a bigger church in order to make friends. Let me tell you, it is possible to be in a megachurch and have no friends. I know that from experience.

Deb and I have been part of some huge churches.

At first, we were just attenders who never got involved who expected others to reach out and we never made friends. We learned from that and when we went to other churches we always got involved in a small group or ministry like band, dance or choir. That's where we made relationships that developed into friendships.

To have friends, you must take advantage of the opportunity to meet people and then you must reach out. Don't wait for others to reach out to you.

By the way, a friend is someone you enjoy being around. A friend knows when to let something go and when to make it an issue to address.

Deb and I used to have some friends and every time we got together it seemed like there was some major issue to work through. It stopped being any fun to get together with them. We tried, but eventually stopped.

I realize that we sometimes have issues to work through, but if you are easily offended and everything is an issue to work through, people will tire of it quickly.

If all you talk about is your problems and your aches and pains and your failures and your depression – people will not want to be around you. There are times to do that, but not all the time. People don't want to be brought down; they want to be built up.

You might say, "Pastor Joe, I've tried making friends, but I've failed. I'm not a good conversationalist." Let me give you another key - To be a good communicator, you must first learn to be a good listener. James 1:19 says:

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Listening is more than hearing sounds. I can multitask. I can watch TV, read the paper and talk to my wife at the same time. For some reason, that just doesn't cut it with her. I know I'm hearing her, but she does not feel heard if I am doing other things at the same time.

So – I make myself do 3 things: stop, look and listen. To make someone else feel heard, we must stop whatever else we are doing, we must look them in the eye and we must concentrate on listening to them with our full attention. If you get this down, it will help you immensely. Stop – look and listen. Being a good communicator is about being a good listener.

Listen, I know that growing strong relationships is not easy.

And not everyone will respond to you.

Brace yourself – not everyone will like you!

That's okay. You don't give up. Keep reaching out and planting seeds of friendship and you will eventually reap a harvest of friends.

Also, realize everyone has a different capacity for friends.

Everyone has the capacity for friendships, but we all have different capacities for friendship. Some can have a lot, some only a few. So keep trying till you find a fit.

Too many people are sitting around waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for someone else to make the first move. You cannot reap a harvest of friends if you don't plant seeds of friendship.

You can pray and believe God for friends, but remember, faith without works is dead. You must do something.

If you have never taken the step of giving your heart to God and believing in His Son Jesus, I encourage you to make that commitment today.

If you have taken that step of faith but you have been drifting through life unconnected to other believers, I encourage you to "Get Connected."

I know it's harder during this time. But we have small groups you can join that meet online.

If you want to make friends, be an initiator.
Focus on being a friend, not getting friends
Reach out to others – make calls – greet people
Show interest in others
Be quick to listen and slow to talk
And whatever you do - Don't give up!

We need each other now more than ever!
And we are stronger together!