

Back to Church Sunday - Stronger Together
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We are joining thousands of churches across America today for Back to Church Sunday. Our theme for today and for our new sermon series is Stronger Together.

We all want to be stronger: stronger physically, stronger mentally, emotionally and spiritually, stronger spouses and parents, stronger financially and in every other way.

But how do we get stronger? We'll talk about that today and in this series. Some of what we do to get stronger, we do alone. But a lot involves other believers.

The COVID-19 quarantine reminded us of how much we need each other. Having to distance ourselves from each other has provided a powerful reminder of the importance of connection. We are all living through the most tangible reminder in our lifetime that we need each other, that we belong in community, and that we are much stronger together.

As we talk about that today, let's look at Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 which says:

Two people are better than one, because they get more done by working together. If one falls down, the other can help him up. But it is bad for the person who is alone and falls, because no one is there to help. If two lie down together, they will be warm, but a person alone will not be warm. An enemy might defeat one person, but two people together can defend themselves; a rope that is woven of three strings is hard to break.

Did you catch that last part? "A rope that is woven of three strings is hard to break."

Have you ever looked closely at a rope? Even if you haven't, you probably know that a rope consists of several different strands braided together. Individually those strands can hold a little bit of weight. But when those strands are woven together, their strength multiplies exponentially.

Let me ask you this: Would you rather climb the thousand-foot rock faces of Yosemite attached to a long line of yarn or tied into a climbing rope? The answer is pretty obvious!

Rope is a pretty amazing tool. We may not use it much in our lives today, but back in the days of the Bible, it was a revolutionary tool. Think of all the things ancient people could do with a rope.

Rope meant you could catch or tie up an animal to keep it or lead it — all of which led to food and survival. Rope meant you could pull or hoist heavy objects, which meant you could move things or build structures like homes — or pyramids if you were the Egyptians. Rope could help you cross a river or chasm, or hang food or supplies in a safe spot away from wild animals. Rope was both a convenience and a lifesaver.

The important thing about rope is that it has always been made by twisting and weaving multiple strands or fibers together to make it stronger than one strand alone.

We are very much the same. We are like rope. We are stronger as we are woven together by and with Christ, and that happens on multiple levels.

Today I'd like to explore three ways — three strands of our rope if you will — that make us stronger together.

1. We Are Stronger in Christ

When we talk about strength, we must begin with Christ. Jesus is not only our source of strength; He *is* our strength.

The Apostle Paul understood this very well. He famously wrote in Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

In context, Paul was talking about finding contentment in all circumstances, whether he was living with plenty or in want. But in the bigger picture, he was talking about relying on Jesus instead of himself.

You see, what Paul meant what he said in Colossians 3:4: *Christ... is our life.*

Paul understood the truth that Jesus taught in a beautiful word picture found in John 15:1-5.

I am the true vine; My Father is the gardener... A branch cannot produce fruit alone but must remain in the vine. In the same way, you cannot produce fruit alone but must remain in Me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If any remain in Me and I remain in them, they produce much fruit. But without Me they can do nothing.

Jesus often drew examples from the landscape around Him. In that area, grapevines were interwoven across trellises, spreading out wide with leafy branches filled with plump, juicy grapes. But it's the vine that is the main stalk or trunk of the plant. It's the vine that is planted down in the soil, sending out roots to draw water and nutrients up out of the earth.

Different grapes have different tastes because they come from different regions with different soils and climates.

The vine influences everything about the grape. The vine is the life source of the branches and the fruit. You don't have to be a farmer to know that if you cut off the branches from the vine, those branches are dead. Their strength and vitality are that vine. Without it, they are lost, disconnected, and starved for life.

This is why Jesus reminds His disciples and us to abide or live in Him. He is our life! And apart from Christ, we have no life or strength!

He is the strength we draw upon to live this life and face its challenges and to become the people God calls us to be.

Even when we are weak, which takes us to our second point:

2. We Are Stronger in Weakness

How does that make sense? Paul can shed some light on this one for us too. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about a thorn in the flesh he had to continually face. It was an ongoing kind of weakness or struggle like we all go through and want to get rid of. Paul describes his problem like a thorn stuck in his skin; it's a nagging pain that he wants to go away but won't go away. But God uses it to teach him an invaluable lesson. Here's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10:

I begged the Lord three times to take this problem away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is enough for you. When you are weak, My power is made perfect in you.' So I am very happy to brag about my weaknesses. Then Christ's power can live in me. For this reason I am happy when I have weaknesses, insults, hard times, sufferings, and all kinds of troubles for Christ. Because when I am weak, then I am truly strong.

This is the paradox of the Christian life. It's a different way — a revolutionary way — of living and looking at life.

Jesus has given His life for us, and when we accept and receive that gift, He gives us new life, a transformed life. We can try and try and try as much as we want to change, to improve, to find satisfaction, to be strong, to overcome our problems. But it doesn't work.

As Paul discovered, we can't win the battle on our own. But Jesus says, "I've got this. Abide in me. Live in me. You're weak, and it's OK because I'm strong. Your weakness gives more room for my strength to shine."

It's a little bit like our rope analogy. Rope proves itself under stress. If you're climbing, having a rope can help you feel safer. But that rope doesn't really do its job until it's tested. Until you're a hundred feet high on a cliff and you fall. Then you are weak and powerless. And that's exactly when the rope is strong. That's when it comes through to save the day and your life.

When we are weak, then there's no doubt that it's the strength of Christ that carries us through. And as we're going to see next, He weaves us into community to make us even stronger together.

3. We Are Stronger Together

Together is where Christ magnifies His strength exponentially as we live out our lives as the body of Christ. Each of us is a single part, woven together like that rope into a much stronger unit to support each other and function as the hands and feet of Christ on earth. Romans 12:4-6 says it like this:

Each one of us has a body with many parts, and these parts all have different uses. In the same way, we are many, but in Christ we are all one body. Each one is a part of that body, and each part belongs to all the other parts. We all have different gifts, each of which came because of the grace God gave us.

God created us to need each other, and we are stronger when we can lean on each other for support and understanding and help. That's the way the early church worked. The church was born out of a group of believers praying together. Acts 1:14 says:

They all joined together constantly in prayer...

Acts 2:1 & 4 says:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on them when they were together!

As these believers risked their lives to follow Jesus and live like Him, they took care of each other in every way. They pulled together to make sure their basic needs were met. Acts 2:44-47 says:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

I'm so proud of you because many of you gave to our benevolence fund and during this pandemic we've been able to help every single church member who told us they had a need! We are stronger together!

For the early church, Jesus was their strength and life.

And even though they were a ragtag collection of powerless individuals in the midst of the mighty and oppressive Roman Empire, they eventually changed the world — together.

Sounds great, doesn't it? But I think it's easy for us to dismiss the early Christians' way of life as just great history. I'm not suggesting that we could or should exactly replicate the way they did things. We live in a different culture that shape the way we live. But, unfortunately, I think our American culture often gets in the way of our understanding and realization of what togetherness really means.

Here in America, we have a long history of romanticizing and idealizing the rugged individual. Think of those old Western movies. I know some of you probably grew up watching old Westerns. What comes to mind when you think of those? John Wayne? Clint Eastwood? The Lone Ranger?

For years, Hollywood served us a steady diet of rugged cowboys who ride alone and like it that way. Solitary figures who don't need or want anyone else. There's a lot to be said for strong leaders and American ingenuity, but in many ways, we've bought into the lie of the rugged individual — the lone ranger who goes it all alone. Living as a loner doesn't work long term. In fact, it's dangerous!

33% of Americans have experienced depression and anxiety during this pandemic. 11% have considered suicide. Among young people aged 18-24 – that jumps to 25%! Experts say that one of the main reasons for this is the isolation, loss of community and what they call “religious contact” or church.

From the moment we're born, we need human interaction. Scientists have made fascinating discoveries about the powerful bond between newborns and their mothers. It's why hospitals regularly have people who hold and soothe premature and sick newborns when their parents can't be there or need a break.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is a large body of research linking the lack of human touch in orphanages to infant mortality, failure to thrive, and developmental delays.

As humans, we belong together. Is it any wonder that social media is the defining technology of current generations, used by billions of people around the world? Even as our technology gives us individual access to amazing tools and information, we are still drawn together, using our technology to seek connection and relationship with other people.

Connection and relationship aren't just a luxury for us — they are a need. They are hardwired into the fabric of our being by our Creator. They are a reflection of His very nature! And as our God calls us into relationship with Himself, He also calls us into relationship and community with each other.

As we join together and find our place in the Body of Christ, we find our true place. We experience acceptance and belonging.

Even in our weakness, we are stronger together as Christ fills us with His life and power. That doesn't make us perfect - far from it. We are the family of God on earth, and every family, even the healthiest families, have a little bit of their own weirdness or dysfunction. Despite our best intentions, we sometimes hurt each other. We bicker or disagree or wrong each other. But we must stay connected to each other because we are so much stronger together.

I know relationships are difficult, but we must continue pursuing togetherness in God's love. Let's work to build deeper relationships and support each other.

Maybe that means taking the next step of joining us regularly for worship or joining a small group or a service ministry. Maybe it's just greeting someone around you who you don't know. Or reaching out to a casual acquaintance. There is a place in this community for every single one of us. And we are most definitely stronger together.

We just finished a series on the end times and one of the Scriptures I read was Hebrews 10:25 which tells us to:

Do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.

Paul is saying that even through believers needed each other in former times – we need each other even more in these last times!

Christians accomplish nothing if all they do is attend church. We must move beyond just going to church and start being the church. That means we must get connected to others. We must also find our place of ministry and start doing ministry together.

Not being connected with the body of Christ limits what the church can accomplish because individuals cannot accomplish what the whole can accomplish. Ephesians 4:16 says:

From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

How many parts must do their share for the church to grow? Each part! What's your part? And are you doing it?

Let me ask you this: what would the church be like if everyone was like you? If everyone attended like you – built relationships like you - gave like you – served like you – witnessed like you – worshipped like you?

You can worship alone – and you should - but when you worship with other believers, Jesus said Matthew 18:20:

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.

There's a realm of God's presence we don't get into on our own!
We are stronger together!

You can do warfare alone – and you should - but there is greater power when we war together. Leviticus 26:8 says:

Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.

We have greater victories when we fight together. We are stronger together!

You can pray alone – and you should - but there is power in the prayer of agreement. Jesus said in Matthew 18:19:

If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven.

There are some things we only receive when we pray together. We are stronger together!

One snowflake is nothing, but if a bunch of snowflakes stick together, they can stop traffic. They are stronger together!

One wave is no big deal, but if you combine a bunch of little waves, they become a powerful tsunami. They are stronger together!

One raindrop is no big deal, but God combined a bunch of raindrops and flooded the whole earth. They are stronger together!

And we are stronger together!

God poured out His presence in Solomon's temple when all the people worshiped together as one! They were stronger together!

God poured out His Spirit on the day of Pentecost when all the believers prayed together as one! They were stronger together!

And when we pray together and worship together, God will pour out His presence and power in greater measure!

We are stronger together!!!