

Series: Grace Forward

Sermon #3: Get in a Group

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Dr. Matt Cassidy --- January 17, 2021

Good morning, Grace. We survived that blizzard! If you're new to Austin, that was winter last Sunday. That was it. And if you are new to Austin and you're feeling like you've got a fever or you're feeling weak and run down and all that, it's not COVID. That's cedar. And your real estate broker didn't tell you about that, did they? Nope. Welcome to Austin.

Review

We are on our third week in a series we're calling Grace Forward. We're talking about what we believe Grace will be like in the future and how God will choose to use us in that context, and how you and I can individually play a part in Grace forward, in the future of Grace. And at this point it's been individuals getting in competition condition so that we can play our part as we play a part on the team, as the body of Christ called Grace.

And last week our homework was to write down your goals, body, soul, and spirit. I did. I hope you did too. Me? Become like Christ in your body: it's diet, exercise, and sleep. We're changing our diet. We got rid of all the sweets and the candies in the house. I'm adding a little something to my exercise routine. And I'm literally taking a master class on how to sleep better. It gets that bad, you young people. You watch. Anyway, I've already lost a little bit of weight, too. So that's good.

On soul, I've decided that I need to confess sooner and more thoroughly. And that's what I'm going to try and do for the next several months. Even right now when I said that we got rid of all the candy—I ate it. I ate all of it. I ate the frosting off a six-week-old gingerbread house. I know. And I'd do it again. And the weight I lost? That was just a haircut, so there's the confession part.

Become like Christ in all of life, become like Christ in body, and in soul, and in spirit. My goal is to become like Christ in spirit. I got a new devotional book that I haven't read before.

I'll be working through that this year. I believe that I need to add worship music to the genre of music that I listen to when I'm studying and doing other things. I'm going to focus on forgiving and forgetting sooner---especially with Carl. Here's my real goal. I want to hear His voice and I want to obey God's voice. I want His Spirit to speak to me and I want to do what He tells me to do.

That's body, soul, spirit goals written down. Here we go.

But there's something missing. I'm never going to get there. There's more to add. You've got to get in a group. That's the key. You've got to get in a group. That's the theme of the day.

Why Should You Get in a Group?

Life change cannot happen in isolation. Real life change happens in a trusted community. The most you can make out of your life and life goals happens on teams. That's where the magic happens. We become more than we could be independent of one another. It's the power of living life together.



Why does that work? Let me give you an example. This person here is Mark Sanchez. Mark Sanchez played for the NFL for ten years on six different teams. He's got a strange career. He only started one year as a college student, his junior year at USC. It was a good year—they went 12-1. And he said, "I'm going pro"—one season and he goes pro.

His coach said, "Not a good idea. You're not ready yet."

He said, "I'm Mark Sanchez."

And so, he goes and plays for the Jets his rookie season—not so good. Physically his body did great. Soul—not so good. Here's the thing with Mark Sanchez. He is a perfectionist. He's highly critical. He sulks regularly and he's a terrible actor. He wore it all the time. And so, you can't lead a team if you are a sulker. That is not motivational. And so, if he didn't change his soul, he was going to wreck the team as the leader of the team.

And so, they came up with a plan. They would fine Mark Sanchez for any time that he was discouraging or pessimistic, even in his body language. And so, one of the team captains was in charge, and whenever they saw that sort of thing happen and his head would go down and his shoulders would turn in, there goes the flag, there goes a fine, and Mark loses some money.

What's really strange about the story is it was Mark Sanchez's idea. He realized that he couldn't change—part of the issue was his soul—and he couldn't change that without his team helping him. Because it was so desperate that he realized these things inside of him needed to get worked on. So, he went to his team for advice and he went to his team for help.

It was so bad—let me just give you an idea. The offensive coordinator was asked, "This is interesting. We've not seen this before. What would have happened last year if you would've had a fine process?"—his rookie season that he was famous for being so pessimistic about.

"Oh, we pay him a lot of money, but he probably would've filed for bankruptcy. It's a good thing he's doing this. He'll come back this way."

Here's the point. All the athletic skills that you could possibly imagine to start the NFL, but he needed his team to become a better human being.

Aristotle's Three Types of Friends

Aristotle writes a book to his son. It's called *Nicomachean Ethics*. And in that book Aristotle is teaching his son how to live a virtuous life, how to live a good life. In that book he commits two chapters to friendships—two. Because he says this about friendships: without

friendships, no one would even choose to live, even if he had all the other things in life. In this description he says, *Son, there's basically three types of friends*. He's not judging them, he's just putting them in categories to maintain expectations, making sure we're legitimate.

Here are the three types of friends:

1. Friendship of Pleasure

Friends for pleasure. With friends of pleasure, the goal of the friendship is personal pleasure. It's about you feeling good. And so, you'll have a lot of friends like this, and you share something that everybody likes to do, like watching football or fishing or sewing. Whatever it might be, you just enjoy doing it, and enjoy doing it with other people. Now when the season's over, so is the friendship.

See you next year.

You bet. Save me a seat in the bleachers.

Got it.

There are a lot of them. Sometimes it's just best to call them acquaintances. But sometimes you can be friends for a lifetime, but it's just for pleasure.

2. Friendship of Utility

The second type of friendship he talked about was friends of utility. Friends of utility is when the goal is not pleasure so much as it is getting something done. Friends of utility are people that mutually respect each other in their ability to help get that thing done. So, friends of utility often show up on sports teams. We're going to all do this together, we're going to play our parts. A lot of work friends are friends of utility. You're working together for a cause. That's the goal. When the cause or the goal is done, so is the friendship. It's not bad. It's just how they're defined.

3. Friendship of Excellence

Now there are friends of pleasure, friends of utility, and the last friendships he talked about—they're more rare—the friendship of excellence—friends for excellence, friends for

character. Now what's interesting in this description is the goal or the focal point is not the person's pleasure, not the person's goal or a corporate goal, but the other person. A friend for virtue, a friend for excellence, a friend for character, is a virtuous person looking at the other person and saying, *How do I draw out the best attributes from that individual's soul? How do I make them the way they were meant to be?* And that's what drives those types of friendships. They're not typical—usually they're seldom. You don't have a lot of friends like this.

And by the way, they can also be friends in pleasure and in goal-setting, but this virtuous friendship of excellence is what's we were meant to enjoy.

Friends for Body, Soul, and Spirit

Now it wouldn't take much to mildly modify these three types of friendships that Aristotle spoke of two or three thousand years ago and make them look what we've been studying for almost three weeks now, and that's the nature of man, body, soul, and spirit. Let's say that you could have three types of friends with body, soul, and spirit.

Friends for the body—that would be a lot like friends of pleasure, wouldn't it be? But it would be for the purpose of goodness. It's like your workout buddy, it's the guy who spots you, it's the friend who teaches you how to cook or eat healthy. There you go.

And then there are friends for soul. It's looking at making the most of your personality, who you are body, soul, and spirit. Friends for soul would say, *Hey, let's read a parenting book together so we can become better parents. You bet.*

Now—body, soul—friends for spirit. Friends for spirit are wanting you to become a saint, hoping that I could do something in your life so you could see the kingdom of God revealed before you; that you could have an intimate relationship with the Father; that you could experience the power of the Spirit of God in your life; that you would be never bored with the forgiveness that comes in Christ and the freedom.

So, see those types of friendships? Someone says, "That outfit looks terrible on you." There's a friend for the body.

Someone says, "Your critical attitude is embittering your children," or "Your gossip is wrecking relationships." That's a friend for the soul.

But if someone were to say, “Your fear-driven living isn’t even living. Why don’t we look at how we can apply the sovereignty of God and His omni-power into these places of fear so that you could live—live free.” That would be a friend for spirit.

Are you hearing the power of friendships, in the context of trying to change something for the better, for the glory of God?

Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one’s community back from the path of sin.

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is famous for his writings on commitment and community. Look what he says about friendship: “Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin”—just lets them keep going. That’s cruel. “Nothing could be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one’s community back from the path of sin.” Nothing could be more compassionate than to bring a person back from their sin” if you’re in that community. That is a spirit friend, a friend of spirit.

If you want to grow, body, soul, spirit, you cannot do it alone. If you want to grow and develop your body, soul, and spirit, become like Christ in those ways, you’ll have to do it in community. You’ll need to get in a group.

Benefits of Friendship

Look at the benefits of friendship. These are famous passages. Most of the passages we’ll look at today are familiar to some of you.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:

¹⁰ If one falls down, his friend can help him up.

But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone?

¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Here's Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12. "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and there's no one there to help him 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." That's not a passage about marriage; it's a passage about friendship and the benefits of friendship.

Health Benefits of Friendship

We literally have health benefits by engaging with one another in close friendships for soul and for spirit's sake.

There was a nine-year study—Alameda County did a nine-year study following 7,000 people for all those nine years. And they were looking at and doing the research on the benefits of friendship. And what they found is this: that isolated people were three times as likely to die early than people that were in some kind of connecting community—three times as likely. Now I know some of you who know statistics are probably thinking, *What about the lifestyle of those people? Right? That's probably what was happening. Those people in isolation weren't treating their bodies well.*

So, they gathered up everybody based on their lifestyles as well, and it turns out that the people who had terrible habits for their body—they would smoke and eat poorly and weren't concerned about their sleeping habits, no exercise, excessive drinking—but were in community, they still lived significantly longer than those people that were healthy living but in isolation. They were jogging and eating right and they died sooner still.

Does anybody do math like I do math? Because here's what I just heard. It is better to eat dinky-Twinkies with friends than broccoli all by yourself. You see that? That's science. Let's take an offering right now. I'm on a roll.

Jesus Knew the Benefits of Friendship

Jesus knew this. His twelve men and the women who followed him surely had pleasurable moments and some fun things for their bodies. I think they experienced some good things for their souls. But the purpose of it was not to just go camping and have experiences together. *You only live once.* They were friendships for excellence. They were friends for the spirit.

Peter, that temper—sure, count to ten, whatever, good for your soul. *You've got to understand that you better pray. The devil has asked to sift your very essence. And if you don't start grasping the power of the sovereignty of God and His ultimate justice, this attribute will not go away until your final transition.*

You see, all of their experiences together were purposeful for their soul. They were spiritual friends so that they might see the kingdom of God rolled out right in front of them. They might be able to experience the very presence of God the Father in their life and have a relationship with Him, that they could experience miraculous interventions of the Spirit of God, that they could fully appreciate and never become bored with the forgiveness that comes in Jesus Christ. That's the kind of friendships we're talking about.

Here's What We're Asking

Now when we talk about getting in a group here at Grace, let me just tell you what we're up to. Here's the ask. We'd love everyone—yeah, everyone—to be in a small group—it would be great—starting February 7th—some kind of small group February 7th. There's some overlap here, but let me explain why February 7th is important.

On February 7th we're going to start a seven-week series in Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes, the meaning and purpose of life in the midst of confusion and even anger towards the life that we live. This book answers those questions, so it's perfect for people inside the church, it's perfect for people outside the church to attend this. We're going to put together a small group training. We're going to put together an Ecclesiastes small group discussion guide for everybody that

comes. And what we want to do is see as many people as possible go through the seven-week series together starting February 7th. That would be awesome. It's an experiment.

What Is “A Group”?

Let me show you what it means to be in a group. What is a group? Get in a group—what is a group? A group is anytime there are three to twelve people meeting for purpose, intentional relationship for the purpose of becoming like Christ in all of life.

Here at Grace—look, if the pandemic wouldn't have happened, or if it had happened and we hadn't already had our ministries structured with small groups, we'd be saying, “We've got to change all the ministries here and make them small-group oriented.” Well, we already value intentional relationships. This is not a new thing for us. So, when we say, “Get in a group,” or if you even look at the website where you go to get in a group, it looks like this. And look at all the options we have for you. So, if you're involved in the men's ministry, you're in a group. If you're involved in women's, yes. Celebrate Recovery—absolutely. ReEngage—that's how it's designed. So, if you're in one of those, you're in a group. That's awesome.

If you're not involved in one of these ministries, the youth ministry as well—if you're not involved in one of these ministries, we'd love you to click the bigger button that says, “Get in a group,” and then you could join a group.

If you're already in a ministry group ...

So, here's what it looks like for February 7th—a seven-week series—there are ways to get involved. One, let's just pretend you're already in one of those groups, either men's or women's or one of our communities, whatever it might be. Here's what you can do. Stay in that group—awesome, keep it up. *Maybe even say, I want to go deeper. I feel like we're soul-oriented. Let's spend more time talking about how to be spirit friends.*

But you could also do this. Let's just pretend you're in ReEngage, which is our marriage ministry, and you're in small groups. Say, *You know what? We meet as couples—how about the guys peel off and the gals peel off and we just do the seven weeks together separately? I'll meet you guys at Rudy's and the women can meet at some place that serves quiche or something, I don't know.*

(What's the name of that...? Anyway. They banned me from it, they kicked me out. Oh yeah, Starbucks.)

Anyway, you could peel off and you could each go through Ecclesiastes together. If you don't, that's okay, because you're already in a small group. But we're hoping as many people as possible can go through this.

If you're not involved in a ministry ...

There's another way to do it. If you're not involved in a ministry, click the button, go on the website, the website says "Get in a group," and then we'll actually ask you a number of questions to help you get in a group. Just give this thing a try—seven weeks. Some groups are actually going to meet on campus here at the eleven o'clock hour. You come to church, you cross the hallway, you go and you get in a group. Seven weeks. Let's see what happens. Maybe you could meet someone that's not just a friend for pleasure, but maybe for utility, and maybe for excellence.

Convert an existing group into a group for soul and spirit ...

And then there's another way of doing this. Here's a third way I thought of that we could think about doing this. What if you're in an existing group and it really didn't have excellence or spirit or not even soul in mind? How about the guys you work out with, or neighbors, or friends, or maybe a group of people at work? It's a seven-week series. It is absolutely nondenominational. We do not get paid per person around here.

And the life questions that Ecclesiastes answers are what's on the mind of every person of every race, every socioeconomic group, every age group. They ask these questions. So you could say, *Hey, we're doing this thing. Do you want to do this thing? It's only seven weeks, it starts February 7th.* And you're provided with the discussion questions and some leadership on how to run a small group, all of that. That's all available.

It's a very easy, non-threatening way to do something with your neighbors or your co-workers or your friends or gym buddies. But here's the deal: get in a group. Make that happen. If you're going to do it with your gym buddies or at work, let us know. Click the "get in the group," because we want to send you that material and we want to send you everything we can to set you up to win.

The Bible is filled with men and women living life together with purposeful friendships because they could not become like Christ in all of their lives alone. It doesn't happen because it can't happen. This is the way we're made.

You might know this famous best-selling book year from years ago called *Bowling Alone* by a Harvard research faculty member, Robert Putnam. And he showed through over a dozen different studies in different cultures and eras how relationally isolated people were more likely to have colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death of all sorts. Disconnected people have two to five times a higher risk of death than those with close friends. And we've been in a pandemic for what, ten months, many in isolation? Here's the logo of the day: get in a group or die. Maybe that's why we call them "life groups," to keep you alive. That's it.

God's plan is that no one is ever alone. God's plan is that people are known and they can know other people. It's God's plan that you can be loved and you can love other people, that you could be cherished and cherish other people. And God's plan right now is called the Church. God's plan to fulfill those needs is through the Church, His bride.

The Church in Acts 2

In a passage that's epic—it defines the Church—Acts chapter 2—it says, the people were "devoted." That's a very strong word. They were devoted. That means they had a goal and they wrote it down and they did whatever it took to make that happen. They were committed to the teachings of Jesus Christ. They were committed to fellowship that was real, that unveiled revelation about themselves towards other people. They were committed to praying for one another. They were committed to sharing everything they owned with one another. They were in purposeful community—body, soul, spirit—all of that.

There's power in friendships. So, choose your friends well.

C. S. Lewis, in his writings in the book *The Four Loves*, talks about the four words in Greek for love. And one of them is talking about friendship love. And he says this about the power of friendships: "Friendships amplify or exaggerate who we are." We wouldn't be who we would be without friends. But they amplify in any direction.

Our friends have the power to exaggerate who we are. They can make us more than ourselves or less than ourselves. They can make us more courageous or more villainous.

--C. S. Lewis

Let me see the quote here. “Friends make us more or less than ourselves. They make us more courageous or more villainous.” Choose your friends well. Choose your friends for body—you bet. For soul—better. For spirit—get in a group.

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

It’s bad not to be meeting together. Look what it says in Hebrews: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...” You’ve got a soul, man! You’ve got to get that thing in shape! “... and all the more as you see the Day of the Lord approaching.” Not giving up.

There’s been three times when my marriage washed ashore on the beach. And because I was involved in a great, healthy church with people that knew me and my wife, they picked us up and carried us. Twice I’ve tried to commit occupational suicide. It’s an easy thing to do in my career. But a couple of times I just wanted out and I thought the way out was to do something really stupid, and then I could be left alone for a while. Two times people stepped in and said, “Not a good idea.” And it was because I wasn’t disconnected; I was cared for because someone was looking into my soul. One of them was our former senior pastor. He said, “We’ve got to get this guy out of town.” And I went up to Boston for a couple of months and served at Gordon Conwell. The bigger context of that is that I was spent, wrung out, done. I don’t know where I’d be without Jim intervening and saying, “I’ve got to help this guy because he can’t even help

himself anymore.” You have to be in great relationships with other people for your soul and your spirit.

If you’re sitting right now thinking, *You know, I’ve got this. I’m strong. I feel really confident. I’m okay*--that’s awesome. So, use that. Because there’s somebody that needs your prayers. They need your encouragement. They need your hand on their shoulder. They need your lifting them up. If you are strong and you don’t use it for the Church and for other people, you’re like a big, hulking bodybuilder. It’s like, *What do you do with all that stuff? Can you even pick up your socks? No, apparently you don’t even pick up your own socks. So, you’ve got all that muscle and mass—do something with it.*

Yeah, if you’re in a great place, God bless you. That’s awesome. Now serve. Serve the body with that strength and power. There it is.

Listen to this. Who knows what would happen if we all got healthy—body, soul, spirit, become like Christ in all of life—and then we got in community, because the only way you can make that happen for real is to be in community with one another, personal relationships for soul and spirit. What could happen if we did this collectively and we’re collectively healthy? That’s when we talk about Grace forward even more next week. Grace forward—the power of that.

It’s out of our control, but revival ... the power of that is revival. That was the key to the John Wesley revivals. It wasn’t his preaching; it was the communities that he built. David Watson, who is a historian and studied John Wesley revivals, said that it was the power of the people meeting together in little communities for the sake of excellence of character. They called it “watching over one another in love.” The power of the kingdom to change lives and culture was in the honest, loving communities. Boom. Get in a group.

Conclusion: Get in a Group!

Did you hear me? That’s our theme today: get in a group. You need a group. If you’re weak, you need a group. If you’re strong, you need a group. You need to get in a group. Form a group, start your own group; let us help you do those things. Grace forward is in groups. Everybody’s in a group. Would you pray with me?

Lord, I’d ask that You would help us, maybe for some, just the realization that maybe they’re stuck because they’re not in a great friendship for soul and spirit’s sake. They’ve got all

kinds of buddies that do this or that. They've got friends that talk about knitting or sewing. But when it comes to the real things in life, everybody's so afraid. So, Lord, I'd ask that You, in this first act of courage, would give us the faces of people where we should initiate a group of some kind. I'd ask that You'd give us the courage to be the person that initiates that and initiates the vulnerability. I'd ask that You would give us the names, the faces, the initiation, and that we would follow through with this.

Lord, You bring people into our lives for such a time as this, and so, here we are. I'd ask that You'd give us that power and courage to execute what You have in mind; that we'd hear Your voice and obey it. Lord, bless this church, every soul that's in it, all the communities, all the groups and the collective whole, that we might be a lighthouse on this big hill, seen by so many people, and that people would say, "That's where people find friends and become like Christ in all of their lives." Let's be that. We pray this in Jesus' name. And all God's people said, Amen.