

## Alone Together

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March 14-15, 2015

Living With Limits Series

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

I want to begin with a simple question: what is the one activity that you will see going on at almost every table in every fast food restaurant in America? Let me give you a hint. This activity is going on in every meeting, at every office, no matter who is presenting, or what's being discussed. It is the same activity that's happening in every college classroom even while the instructor is teaching. It's happening in every airport waiting room. This activity is even happening in every church while the pastor is preaching, or while communion is being served.

Do you know what I'm talking about? It is the one activity that you never saw even a decade ago. What's the one thing that people are doing everywhere even when we're eating lunch with friends, or having dinner with family?

Everywhere you look people are texting, reading email, checking their Facebook pages, and posting on Instagram.

Sherry Turkle is a psychologist and professor at MIT who frequently gives TED talks. She coined a phrase a few years ago that I think brilliantly sums up the time we're living in. She said in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we became accustomed to a new way of being.

### Alone Together

Around the dinner table, during board meetings, while we're out on a date, we are texting, shopping, and going on Facebook. Sherry Turkle said that her students have acquired an important new skill. They are able to maintain eye contact with someone while they text someone else. How many of you can do that? How many of you are doing that right now?

We've become accustomed to a new way of being "alone together." We're with one another, but we're also somewhere else, connected to whomever and wherever we want to be. We decide where we want the focus of our attention. Do we want it on the person who is sitting across from us and what they're saying, or do we want to pay attention only to what interests us in the moment? We have a society in which we give each other selective attention.

Professor Turkle wrote about a 16-year old boy who relies on texting for almost everything and said almost wistfully:

*Someday, someday, but certainly not now, I'd like to learn how to have a conversation.*

In every workplace young people show up wearing earphones. Walk through a college library, or the campus of a high tech start-up, and everyone is in their own little bubble, walking by one another, but listening to their own music, furiously typing away on their own keyboards or little touch screens. Alone together.

The Atlantic Magazine published a great piece a few years ago titled "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?" Their conclusion was our relationships can be described as "a mile-wide and an inch deep" – really broad and really shallow. We have hundreds of Facebook friends, and few face-to-face friends – lots of likes and not enough love. We have never been more accessible to one another and never more alienated from one another. We're more linked in and more lonely than ever.

Over the last few decades technology has delivered to us a world in which we never need to be out of touch for even a fraction of a second. But every survey indicates that we are lonelier than ever. The Atlantic Magazine summarized the current state of 21<sup>st</sup> century this way:

*In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are.*

We human beings are made for relationship. The first negative word spoken in Paradise was used by God. We read it way back in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis in Genesis 2 where God says, "It is not good for man to be alone." None of us does well alone.

We are in the season on the church calendar right now that Christians call Lent. Lent is the 40-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. And for Christians of every denomination, Lent is a time of year where we prepare ourselves spiritually for Holy Week – for Good Friday, the day on which Christ died on the cross for our sins, for Holy Saturday when he lay buried in a tomb, and for Easter Sunday when Christ rose from the dead. Thousands of us here made various commitments to abstain from certain things during Lent in order to create more room for God, and to engage in certain things.

Let me ask you a question: How are you doing with your commitments? Are you keeping them? Have you been faithful? You've just got three more weeks to go. If you

broke one of the commitments you made, ask God's forgiveness, pick yourself up, push the restart button, and get going again. Today is a new day.

During Lent, I'm teaching through a much-neglected book from the Old Testament, the book of Ecclesiastes in a series that I've titled Living With Limits. It is a little philosophical book which is designed to confront our tendency to hubris, to over-estimating our capacity, over-estimating what we can achieve in life under the sun, life without God. Ecclesiastes challenges us. Ecclesiastes confronts us. It says you won't get as much satisfaction as you think you are going to get from work or from your accomplishments. You are not going to be nearly as happy as you think you might be by getting more money, by having more sex, or being more famous.

Life in this world has limits. In the section that we're going to look at today, the philosopher who wrote Ecclesiastes tells us that we are not nearly as self-sufficient as we pretend to be. We all need other people. We need deep relationships with other people, and not just the sips we get through social media, but because of the time we're living in. I've called today's message, "Alone Together." Let's pray.

Ecclesiastes 4:1–8 (NIV)

4 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors—  
and they have no comforter.

2 And I declared that the dead,  
who had already died,  
are happier than the living,  
who are still alive.

3 But better than both  
is the one who has never been born,  
who has not seen the evil  
that is done under the sun.

4 And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

5 Fools fold their hands  
and ruin themselves.

6 Better one handful with tranquillity  
than two handfuls with toil  
and chasing after the wind.

7 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

8 There was a man all alone;  
he had neither son nor brother.  
There was no end to his toil,  
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,  
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”  
This too is meaningless—  
a miserable business!

The Bible sets the story of God’s activity in human history on the incredible foundation of the first 11 chapters in the book of Genesis which is the first book of the Bible. What we find in the book of Genesis is that God’s perfect creation was marred by our first parents’ insistence on living independently from God. Rather than living life God’s way, our first parents, and all who followed in their steps, decided to live life on their own terms. Our first parents turned their backs on God and ruined Paradise. What we have in Genesis 4 through Genesis 11 is a story of the progressive breakdown of human community, a breakdown in the relationship between Adam and Eve, a breakdown in the sibling relationship of Cain and Able, and a breakdown in neighborly relationships between people of different families.

So what we see in Genesis 4-11 are two opposite trajectories. On the one hand, we see increasing technological sophistication, expertise in manipulating creation increases. On the other hand, relationship between people, connectedness and community, decreases. Is that not the story of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a story of technological breakthroughs and community breakdowns, amazing innovation and terrible alienation, more connection and less community?

Ecclesiastes 4:1-8 is all about the destruction of community, the breakdown of relationships, and the increase of loneliness.

In these verses the philosopher speaks to the students in his classroom and says, “Let me talk to you about two things that destroy relationships that cause us to live ‘alone together.’” These things destroyed relationships in 500 BC and they continue to destroy relationships in 2015 AD. One has to do with the way we relate to people below us, and the other has to do with the way we relate to people above us. So let’s listen to the philosopher again.

Ecclesiastes 4:1–3 (NIV)

4 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors—  
and they have no comforter.

2 And I declared that the dead,

In these verses we read about

## Community destroyers

The first thing that the teacher points to is the way we relate to people below us.

The way we relate to people below us: oppression

Three times in v. 1 the author speaks about oppression.

Ecclesiastes 4:1 (NIV)

4 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors—  
and they have no comforter.

God gives every human being power. Power is the God-given gift to make a difference.

Power = the God-given gift to make a difference

Now, power is value neutral. God gives us the gift to make a difference, to have an effect, to have influence. But power can be aimed in two very different directions – to build up or to destroy. I think of nuclear power, for example. Nuclear power can be used to generate electricity to light a city. It can also be used to build a bomb to destroy the city. Every human being has power. Sociologists talk about the power that we have in different ways. They speak about personal power, the ability of every human being to influence their environment. Even an infant has personal power. Through their screams they get other people to do their bidding.

Sociologists also talk about role power, or status power. By virtue of our position we have authority. If you are a manager, you have authority over people who report to you. If you are a CEO you have authority over a whole company. If you are a parent, you may have authority over your kids. If you are a teacher, you have authority over your students. If you are a coach you have authority over your players.

So the question the author asks in Ecclesiastes is what do you do with role power, status power? What do you do when you recognize that there is a power differential between you and another person, you are not both coming at one another at 100%, but you've got another 50%. What do you do when you're the 150% person in a relationship? The teacher says that sometimes additional power can be used to abuse the person below us. It speaks about the community-destroying behavior of oppression.

Last weekend President Obama spoke eloquently during a commemorative ceremony in Selma, Alabama, marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday when 600 non-violent protestors were attacked by Alabama State Troopers as they attempted to March from

Selma to Montgomery for voting rights. By the way, if you haven't seen the movie "Selma," you need to see it.

#### Picture of the Movie "Selma"

It shows the extraordinary lengths in which the Jim Crow South went to deny African Americans their right to vote. Before folks could vote, they needed to recite every word of the US Constitution, or guess exactly the number of jelly beans in a big jar, or how many soap bubbles were on a piece of soap.

What is oppression? It is the abuse of power. God gives each of us power. Our power is to be exercised in the way God exercises power. How does God, our Father, exercise his power? He exercises it on behalf of the weak. God uses his power to lift people up. God uses his power to heal people. God uses his power to reconcile marriages. God uses his power to take our sins upon himself by dying in our place on the cross. God uses his power to give, to bless, and to strengthen. But oppressors use their power to crush the weak.

Have you ever been the victim of oppression? Someone stronger than you physically hurt you? Maybe a trusted friend stole from you. A friend or business partner misused their position of trust and betrayed you. Someone you were vulnerable to stabbed you in the back. An employer wrongfully terminated you. Have you ever been the victim of oppression?

When we talk about the abuse of power and misusing our superior position, have you ever oppressed someone else? Have you ever used your superior power to oppress a child? Or a spouse? Or an employee?

What builds community is when we use our power and influence to make a difference for good, to protect, to encourage, to strengthen. So many of us say, "You know, I don't have much power. I'm not Mother Theresa. I'm not Dr. King. I'm not heroic." Maybe you say: I'm just a 20-something student. I'm just getting started at in my career. I'm just a mom, a dad, a retired person. I have a small business. I'm just working somewhere in government. I don't have very much power.

As I said before, we all have power. Every human being has influence. Whatever our jobs, whatever our ages, whatever our positions, whatever our education – even children have power. I want you to watch this wonderful video about some kids in Massachusetts and how they exercised their power when one of their little friends was being bullied.

#### Video of kids in Massachusetts

Don't you want to be like those boys, using your influence to protect?

The philosopher goes on and speaks about a second community-destroying behavior.

Ecclesiastes 4:4–8 (NIV)

4 And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

5 Fools fold their hands  
and ruin themselves.

6 Better one handful with tranquillity  
than two handfuls with toil  
and chasing after the wind.

7 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

8 There was a man all alone;  
he had neither son nor brother.  
There was no end to his toil,  
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.  
“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,  
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”  
This too is meaningless—  
a miserable business!

He speaks about

The way we relate to people above us: envy

Envy is probably the most perverted of the Seven Deadly Sins. In most of the other sins, at least we can be deceived into imagining that they have some fun attached to them. Certainly, lust masquerades as fun. Greed and acquiring more sounds like fun. Sloth might be fun, we just call it leisure. We have magazines celebrating sloth. But envy? Envy has the nastiest face. Envy is mean-spirited. It is never pleasant. There is no fun in envy. I mean the other sins will give you at least some momentary thrill. With pride you get a feeling of satisfaction for a moment of being superior to someone else. You can say, “Look at me, I’m thinner than you are. I’m wealthier than you are. I drive a better car than you do. I got a better grade than you did. My kids are smarter than your kids.”

But envy? There is no thrill in envy. Envy just eats you up inside. What do we mean by envy? The simplest definition of envy was offered by the great Roman Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas who said:

*Envy is simply sorrow at another's good.*

It is hard to admit that we are actually upset because another person is happier than us, or thinner than us, or wealthier than us, or more successful than us. But you see, envy is not only noticing that someone has more than we do; what envy does is it concludes

that as a result of this person having more than me, my self-worth is somehow called into question. Envy is rooted in deep feelings of low self-esteem. Because you are doing well, I somehow am diminished. I'm smaller. The heart of envy is self-belittling. Your success somehow diminishes me.

Have you ever felt because someone got something that you were inferior? You've been demeaned because someone else is praised? Because they are the leader, you are nothing.

Envy is almost always directed against someone who is really near to us – our sisters, our brothers, our in-laws, our co-workers, our neighbors, who is like us, but who is just ahead of us in some way. So mothers will envy other mothers in their own little circle. And soccer players will envy not football players, but other soccer players. Singers on our worship team will envy other singers, not teachers or administrators, or counselors. And restaurant owners will envy other restaurant owners, not owners of a dry cleaning business.

Have you seen this friends? Is there someone near to you or like you, but seems a step ahead of you in some way because of how their family is doing, because of their relationships, because of their position, because of their recognition? Someone who is near to you, or like you, but at least in one area, that they're doing better than you that you envy?

I do want to note parenthetically that social media has increased both envy and envy-provoking behavior. Sociologists have noticed that the more people spend time on Facebook, the more depressed they are because folks compare their lives with the lives of hundreds of their friends. And they're friends lives seem to be great; at least that part of life that we review on Facebook they are always doing well. There is something perverse about our use of social media because we not only find ourselves envying other people, but we deliberately provoke envy. We take 30 pictures of ourselves and then post the perfect one of us and our fantastic cruise. Here is the picture of our perfect child receiving yet another award. Have you ever found yourself saying something on social media, or saying something in a conversation which you knew at the time was really designed to provoke envy in the other person? How perverse is that?

Look at my fantastic engagement ring. My fiancé is amazing and wealthy. Let me show you a picture of my incredible new home. Let me share with you the extraordinary success I've been enjoying. Oops, I've let my SAT scores slip out again. Of course, not so that you, my friend, would join with me in celebrating God's goodness, but so that you would envy me. So that you will know that I am superior. How twisted is that?

What's the cure for envy and for our perverse desire to have others envy us? I find it helpful every so often to write down in detail all the things I'm grateful for. Just

yesterday I wrote in my journal how much would I pay, if I was blind, just to be able to see as well as I do? How much would I pay, if I was deaf just to be able to hear as well as I am able to hear? How much would I pay to be pain-free? If I couldn't read, just to be able to read? If I couldn't think clearly, just to be able to have clarity of mind? I made a list of about 50 things – my body, my work, my family, my friends, the gift of having God reveal to me that he loves me – what would I give for that? What would I give to have God send his Son to die on a cross for me, shed his blood so that I could be forgiven? I have so much; you have so much; we are so blessed – why should we ever envy anyone? Why should I ever need to deliberately provoke envy in someone else?

For almost 40 years in all the various apartments and houses and neighborhoods that Marlene and I have lived in since we got married, we have had a calligraphy of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 hanging in our bedroom.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (NIV)

- 9 Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their labor:  
10 If either of them falls down,  
one can help the other up.  
But pity anyone who falls  
and has no one to help them 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.

The philosopher is telling us what God said way back in Paradise. We human beings don't do well alone. We are not self-sufficient. We need one another. The reason that I regularly encourage all of you to get connected to one of the small groups here, and to not make excuses about busy-ness, or schedules. We've got hundreds of groups – coed groups, women's groups, men's groups, men's Midpoint that meets here at the church on Wednesday evening, support for life groups dealing with various hurts, habits, and hang-ups, 20-Something groups, groups at our campuses. The reason that I regularly encourage you to take a step and to engage in one of our groups here at the church is that we don't do well alone. That's what the philosopher is saying in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. And while the verses are often applied to marriage, he is talking about community, our relationship with each other.

And by the way, I want to mention the singles group that meets here at the church led by Sher Isaacs. The Singles group is hosting a

Singles Project: 4 Critical Choices on Thursdays, March 19-April 9 at 7:00 p.m.

If you are single, why not come out for this event hosted by Sher and the Singles group. It's an opportunity to build relationships, have fun and learn in this 4-week course for single adults from ages 18-108. Why not register online at:

[Vineayrdcolumbus.org/ministries/singles/events](http://Vineayrdcolumbus.org/ministries/singles/events)

It's a great opportunity to make connections and to start building relationships.

In these last few verses, the philosopher speaks about three things that build community.

### Community builders

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (NIV)

9 Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their labor:  
10 If either of them falls down,  
one can help the other up.  
But pity anyone who falls  
and has no one to help them up.

We don't know why the person falls. Maybe she was tripped by someone. Most often we fall because of our own negligence. No one is sticking their foot out. We just weren't watching where we were going. We were doing something that we shouldn't have been doing. We can fall physically, but the more important falls are when we fall spiritually. Let's say we've spiritually fallen into some particular sin. We've messed up. You are in school and you've cheated on an exam. It's tax season – you are filling out your taxes and you decide to hide some income, or over-estimate your deductions. Whatever sin we fall into, how do we get back up?

Ecclesiastes says you don't get up alone.

Help when we fall: confess to one another

Listen to the words of James 5:16,

James 5:16 (NIV)

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Roman Catholics have institutionalized James 5:16 and said, "if you sin, you need to go to an ordained priest and make confession to the priest." The Protestant Reformation begun by Martin Luther said, "Wait a minute. We're all priests, according to the Bible. Every Christian is a priest, not just the ordained clergy, but every one of us who has

received Christ into our lives and has trusted him and his death on the cross for our salvation – every one of us is a priest. All of us can go directly to God. We don't need to go through another person to get to God." We get to God through our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. So those in the Protestant tradition stopped going to confession. We said, "We can just confess our sins to God."

But you know, the Roman Catholics are on to something, not that we need a specially ordained priest to confess our sins to, but there is powerful practical help found in James 5:16 in which the Apostle James tells us, "Don't just confess your sins to God; confess your sins to one another." There is real help in lifting us up after we have fallen when we choose to confess what we have done to another flesh and blood human being so that we don't remain alone together.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a Lutheran pastor and was murdered in the closing days of WWII by the Nazis, wrote a wonderful little book about Christian relationships with each other. It is one of my favorite books called Life Together.

Photo of Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer says this:

*Confess your faults one to another (James 5:16). He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is we are sinners!*

Bonhoeffer is talking about the church mask that we've all learned to put on when we are in Christian fellowship? "How are you doing, sister?" "I'm blessed and highly favored. I'm doing great, Praise the Lord!" But I thought you just lost your job and that your ex is dragging you to court again; and that one of your kids is using drugs. God's specialty is mess; the one thing God won't heal is our pretend selves. Can we just be real for a moment? God is good all the time; all the time God is good. But we need to take our church masks off and confess authentically how we're really doing; how we're really feeling not only to God, but to another person so that God can heal our real selves.

Now, if you are in a small group, I want to encourage you over the next few weeks, before Good Friday and Easter, to have a time in small group, maybe in groups of 2 or 3,

where there is an opportunity for confession. Remember, if you are a Christian, you are a priest. We can confess one to another.

But I want to open up another opportunity for all of us here. For the past several years we have hosted Stations of the Cross in the Chapel at our Cooper Road campus during the Thursday and Friday of Holy Week. It is an opportunity to help us prepare for Easter by mediating on the journey that Christ went through from his betrayal to his crucifixion. This year we are providing an opportunity for people to come to the church and not only walk through the Stations of the Cross, but have an opportunity to engage in confession to someone on our pastoral staff, to receive some prayer, and receive communion. So we've got this opportunity for you. This is not a "have to," this is a "get to." We'll just take a few minutes with each person.

**Stations of the Cross and Confession** – Thursday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. (3:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. are family friendly hours) and Friday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. (breaking for Good Friday Service) – in the Chapel and Prayer Suite

What builds community? Here is the second community-building practice so we're not alone together. Let's look at v. 11:

Ecclesiastes 4:11 (NIV)

11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.  
But how can one keep warm alone?

The teacher is giving another example of the benefit of friendship. The picture is of people on a journey. Contrast the image of two people traveling together at night, who can share their body heat with one another to keep warm with the very sad picture of a lonely traveler who at night vainly tries to keep himself warm alone. Of course, this applies in marriage, but the picture is of a journey. How do we help one another in the journey of life.

Help on the journey: encourage one another

We don't do well alone. We don't do well alone together. We all need to be encouraged. What is encouragement?

Encouragement is all about cheering other people on.

Encouragement = cheering other people on

Think about how good it feels to know that someone is in your corner, cheering you on, wanting you to do well. There are always tons of people around us who correct us, who catch us doing something wrong. Here is a little bit of family wisdom for those of us

who want to have a happier, more positive family experience. Catch your spouse doing something right and affirm that. You know, I really appreciate that you get up early and make me coffee. I'll bet they'll repeat that behavior. Do you want to improve your relationship with your teenager, catch your teenager doing something right? Some of you might say, "That's really hard to do, Rich." But catch your teen doing something right. "Hey, thanks for unloading the dishwasher. Thanks for calling when you got home. I appreciate you writing to your grandmother. That really made her happy."

Peter Drucker, who is widely considered to be the father of modern management, said:

*Encouragers build on people's strengths so that their weaknesses become almost irrelevant. ~Peter Drucker*

Everyone needs encouragement. Mother Teresa said:

*Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody: I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat. ~Mother Teresa*

Listen, people in the United States are mostly not starving for food. But everyone is starving for encouragement. It doesn't matter if you are the boss, or the newest employee, a teacher or a student, a coach or a player, a pastor or a church member. Here is one thing I know about every person that you and I will ever meet: everyone wants to be encouraged. Everyone wants to know that there is someone in our corner cheering us on. Everyone wants to be caught doing something right. Everyone wants to be thanked.

Let's face it. Life is hard. And even though many of us have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is making a real difference in our lives right now, we still live in a broken, fallen world. Life is hard. We need encouragement to keep going. God uses people of any age, any race, rich, poor, single, married, any level of maturity to encourage. You do not have to have a certain bank account in order to encourage. You may be flat broke and you are still able to encourage someone else. You don't have to have an advanced degree. You may only have a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education and you still are able to encourage. You don't have to be a certain age. A 75-year old can encourage a 17 year old and a 17-year old can encourage a 75-year old.

And finally, the teacher says this in v. 12:

Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV)

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

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Again, the picture is of travelers on a journey. The roads in the ancient Near East were hazardous. A lone traveler was easy prey for robbers hiding in the hills and behind rocks. One person would be overpowered, but two? They could provide resistance. One could aid the other. We don't do well alone. We don't do well alone together.

We offer one another not just physical protection through community, but spiritual protection by praying for one another.

Help with our enemies: pray for one another

There is a wonderful story in Exodus 17 in which Joshua, who was a young soldier leading an army of Israelites in their fight against a strong enemy who attacked them, the Amalekites. The great prophet Moses is standing up on a hill looking down in the valley watching Joshua and the Israelites fighting against their enemy, the Amalekites. Here is what we read in Exodus 17:11.

Exodus 17:11 (NIV)

11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.

There comes a time when we can't do life by ourselves any more and we need help. I remember when my granddaughter was two, one of her favorite statements was "I want to do it by myself." If you were trying to help her put her shirt on, or put her shoes on, or figure out a puzzle, or help her ride her tricycle, "I want to do it by myself. Leave me alone; I want to do it by myself."

But there comes a time in life where we stop being spiritual 2-year olds, where we recognize no matter how competent we may be, how old we are, how together or how successful, we can't do life alone. We need to be honest with other people. We need encouragement from another person. We need the prayers of other people. We need help from someone bigger than us, stronger than us, wiser than us. We need help from God. The limit may come for you, friends, when you are in a hospital room being prepared for surgery, or when a loved one is lying in a bed sick. The realization of our limits may come when we finally become honest about an addiction, or someone we care about who has an addiction. Maybe the limits come as you battle depression or try to fix your hopelessly broken marriage, or as you struggle with a rebellious child, or you have every door slammed in your face when you were searching for a job, or trying to get into grad school. Maybe you've reached your limits as you realize that you are not prepared for the change that's happening. You are having a baby and you don't feel ready. You're getting married, or you just got married. You will soon be an empty nester after years of parenting. You are retiring. Change can make us recognize our limits.

We realize that we need power that we don't have. And there is nothing more helpful when we are struggling with a problem that is too big for us than to have a friend pray

for us. At some point, no matter how self-sufficient we are, how independent we are, how proud we are as human beings, we're all going to reach our limits. And we realize being alone together doesn't work.

Let me ask you a personal question. Have you reached the limits of your ability to help yourself? Have you reached the limit of your ability to help someone you love? Do you recognize your need for someone bigger than you, someone stronger than you, someone wiser than you? Friends, you don't have to be alone. The Bible says that Jesus is God with us.

Conclusion

## Alone Together

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Rich Nathan

March 14-15, 2015

Living With Limits Series

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

### I. **Community Destroyers**

- A. The way we relate to people below us: oppression
- B. The way we relate to people above us: envy

### II. **Community Builders**

- A. Help when we fall: confess to one another
- B. Help on the journey: encourage one another
- C. Help with our enemies: pray one another