

It's Not Good To Be Alone: Community and God's Kingdom

**Rich Nathan
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Vineyard Core
1 Peter 2:9-10**

Americans are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. Every bit of social science data that we have that is aimed at measuring the strength of people's relationships, the extent of people's isolation, the number of relational connections people have tell us that Americans in the 21st century are lonelier than ever.

An epidemic of loneliness

And we are lonely for multiple reasons. Americans are more solitary than ever before. You go back to 1950, less than 10% of American households contained only one person. Fast forward to today, the percentage of Americans who live alone has tripled. Nearly 30% of American households have just one person.

Now, solitary living does not mean that you are lonely. But living alone can certainly contribute to loneliness. A 2010 AARP survey (for those of you who don't know what AARP stands for, it is the American Association of Retired Persons) found that 35% of adults older than 45 describe themselves as chronically lonely, more than one out of three, as opposed to 20% just a decade ago. A major study on the subject of loneliness

found that 20% of all Americans including young adults, about 60 million people are unhappy with their lives because of loneliness.

Across the Western world physicians and nurses have begun to speak openly about an epidemic of loneliness. We see signs of this epidemic everywhere. Individuals gather less; when we gather our bonds are less meaningful. There is a measurable decrease in confidants; folks you can talk with about important matters.

In 1985 only 10% of Americans said they had no one with whom to discuss important matters. By 2004, 25% of all Americans said they had nobody to talk to. 20% said they had only one confidant.

In the face of all of this loneliness, we've essentially created an army of replacement confidants. Ronald Dworkin, an American scholar and philosopher, points out that in the late 1940's America had:

In the late 1940's America was home to 2500 clinical psychologists, 30,000 social workers, and fewer than 500 marriage and family therapists.

In 2010, America had 77,000 clinical psychologists, 192,000 clinical social workers, 400,000 non-clinical social workers, 50,000 marriage and family therapists, 105,000 mental health counselors, and 30,000 life coaches.

This does not include the tens of thousands of substance abuse counselors, and nurse psychotherapists, and psychiatrists.

Now, the majority of patients that therapists see don't have a psychiatric diagnosis. They aren't struggling with mental illness, clinical depression, or some psychosis. The majority of people that therapists see today are struggling with what we used to call regular problems. That's not diminishing the problem. That is not saying that the problem isn't serious, or doesn't hurt. But folks used to talk with friends and confidants about these issues. Now we have to hire a trusted confidant.

So we are more solitary; we have fewer confidants. Suburban sprawl has certainly contributed to the epidemic of loneliness. You drive up to the typical suburban home. It is on a curved street. You pull into your driveway, push a button, go into your private garage, shut the garage door in back of you, and go into your house. If you are going to hang out, you don't hang out on the front porch. Many suburban homes don't even have a front porch. You hang out on your back deck. Folks don't know their neighbors; they don't even know their neighbors names. But most suburban dwellers are not close friends with their neighbors.

And another massive contributor to loneliness is social networking. Sherry Turkle is a psychologist and a professor at MIT, whose primary field of study is the relationship

between humans and technology. She wrote a book several years titled Alone Together.

Book Cover Alone Together by Sherry Turkle

She said everywhere you look people are:

Alone together

In restaurants families and colleagues sit at the table and don't talk with one another. They text other people. In parks mothers are not talking to their children or to each other. They are staring at their phones. Watch a group of teenagers walking down the street silently typing. Children are sitting in strollers playing with iPads. Watch people at church texting and checking their FaceBook. The problem is not that we are not communicating all the time – communicating through texts, emails, on FB and on Twitter. The problem is we are talking at each other and not with each other. We have little sips of relationship, but not long cool drinks.

More and more folks never call because they find calling to be inconvenient and folks at the other end don't pick up. So we just shoot them a text.

Social networking which was supposed to strengthen our connections with each other appears, at least according to experts like Sherri Turkle, to have weakened our connections. We have many more connections, but they are more superficial than ever. And at the end of the day, posting something on your wall does not relieve our loneliness.

The Bible has much to say about loneliness. According to Genesis 1, God created the universe and everything in it. And seven times in Genesis 1 God creates something and calls it good. Of all the numbers that carry significance in the Bible, the #7 is important because it is used to signify completeness, or totality. God looks out on the universe that he made and 7times says, "It is good." The first time we hear God saying that something is not good is in Genesis 2:18,

Genesis 2:18 (NIV)

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

I am going to continue in a series that I started last week that I've titled Vineyard Core. We're talking about the basic ingredients that lead to spiritual vitality for the follower of Christ. These are basic discipleship ingredients.

Picture of a pentagon with “God’s Kingdom” in the center, “worship” on the bottom, and on one of the right angles, put “community.”

I’ve called today’s message, “It is Not Good to be Alone: Community and God’s Kingdom.” Let’s pray.

1 Peter 2:9–10 (NIV)

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Why is it not good to be alone?

It is not good physically

John Cacioppo is the Director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. He is considered to be the world’s leading expert on loneliness. He wrote a landmark book several years ago called Loneliness.

Book Cover of Loneliness by John Cacioppo.

In the book he talks about how profoundly the epidemic of loneliness is affecting basic human physiology. What he discovered was that there are much higher levels of the stress hormone, something called epinephrine in lonely people. Loneliness digs deep into your body. The world's leading expert on loneliness wrote:

When we drew blood from older adults and analyzed their white cells, we found that loneliness somehow penetrated the deepest recesses of the cell to alter the way genes were being expressed.

So loneliness is not just a feeling. Loneliness digs into your body. It affects the basic way that your DNA works. When you're lonely, your whole body is lonely. Loneliness will suppress your immune system, making you sick. It will increase the risk of infection, elevate your blood pressure. Lonely people are at an increased risk for stroke, cardiovascular disease.

Newsweek reported recently that:

People with extensive social ties live longer – up to 2 ½ years longer – than people who are isolated. Researchers in Australia followed 1477 men and women older than age 70. After ten years, scientists determined that people

who had contact with close friends lived longer than people who relied only on a spouse or a child.

It is not good to be alone. It is not good physically.

It is not good emotionally

I've mentioned before in previous teachings about a famous Harvard study regarding what makes people happy. The Harvard study is, I believe, the longest running study of individuals ever conducted. The study began in 1938 and it followed over 250 Harvard undergrads for 75 years. They followed up with each of these graduates year after year, did psychological testing with them, physical testing. They examined people's habits. They followed people for 75 years and tried to figure out what makes people thrive. What leads to human happiness and human thriving? After 75 years of study, here is their conclusion: The single factor that leads to health and happiness in old age is warm relationships.

The chief investigator in this study was convinced that what matters most in life in terms of human thriving and human happiness is warm relationships.

And by the way, what tore people down the most, the single most destructive thing they discovered after following these Harvard grads for 75 years, the thing that tore everything down was alcoholism.

It is not good emotionally to be alone. That's why no less of an expert than John McCain, who was a prisoner of war in Viet Nam, came out vehemently against solitary confinement. He said,

Solitary confinement crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of mistreatment. Human beings can endure horrible forms of torture. What crushes people is loneliness.

It is not good physically to be alone. It is not good emotionally to be alone.

It is not good spiritually

There is a spiritual principle, friends, that the healthy spiritual life at one moment doesn't in any way guarantee a healthy spiritual life a month later, or a year later. Certainly, not a decade later. It is so common to watch people's spiritual commitments slip and to have people drift away from the Lord. So many parents have observed this in their kids. So many teen leaders know of teens in their youth groups who are turned on

to Christ. Their teen is reading their Bibles, they're witnessing, and they're praying with other teens, they're excited.

Then they go off to college and in a few months they've let things slip. Their spiritual desire has been turned down. After a few months they are no longer reading their Bibles. They are dating outside of the Christian faith. They are doing things that they used to argue against with their friends, when they were in high school. What's happened? There is a basic law in the kingdom of God that you will not persevere as a believer in Jesus Christ unless you are a strong believer to his church.

I want you to hear this now. There are hundreds of you, who over the last couple of years have made commitments or recommitments to Christ here at Vineyard. You've stood up in one of our services. You've come forward. You've received prayer. You've signed decision cards. Maybe you received some materials or letters in the mail from me or another pastor. But if you are not engaged in close Christian fellowship, if you do not plunge yourself into Christian community and Christian relationships, I guarantee you, you will not see real change happening in your life after six months, or after a year. You are going to see drift in your life away from that decision for Christ.

The reason why I regularly talk with you about getting involved in a small group here at Vineyard Columbus – a women's group, a men's group, a co-ed group, a JH group, a support and recovery group, a pastor-led group here at the church like Midpoint, or our

Beth Moore Bible Studies for women, or Alpha is that there is a law of the kingdom of God:

You cannot be a strong believer unless you are a strong believer

You cannot be a close follower of Christ unless you are knit into deep Christian relationships. If you want to pursue Christ over the long haul, if you want to see really good change and not just a momentary decision that you walk away from, if you don't want to just run a sprint, but you want to run a marathon, you've got to connect to a group, to a group of other Christians with whom and before whom you can live an open and transparent life. By the way, I think that many of us know individuals who were in our church, maybe even attended a small group for a while, and then just stopped because they got busy, because they were raising kids, because they were alienated as a result of something that happened, they got caught up in their jobs, they got busy with school – I think all of us know people who are drifting. Folks who are not as passionate about their Christian commitments as they were a year ago, or five years ago.

What do you do? One approach is just apathy. Well, it's a big church. People make choices. We need hundreds of people in this church to take the time to make a phone call, to schedule a lunch, to reach out to individuals. It is your job, follower of Christ, to be your brother's keeper.

It is not good spiritually to be alone. Henry Cloud, a Christian psychologist, wrote this in his wonderful book titled How People Grow; I would high recommend this book to you, if you are looking for a good Christian book to read.

Book Cover How People Grow by Dr. Henry Cloud

Cloud writes:

Hardly anyone completely recovers from an addiction without connection to a support system. Some may stop their addictive or compulsive behaviors, but their relational patterns do not change, and most times they relapse, if they do not do group work. ...As people are cut off from others and their souls are starved for connectedness, the need for love turns into an insatiable hunger for something. It can be a substance, sex, food, shopping, or gambling, but these never satisfy, because the real need is for connection to God and others, and to God through others. When people receive that, the power of addiction is broken.

It is not good spiritually to be alone. One more thought about the spiritual need for connection. What you become will be determined by who you hang around with.

Proverbs 13:20 says this:

Proverbs 13:20 (NIV)

20 Walk with the wise and become wise,
for a companion of fools suffers harm.

We see people in the Bible making very foolish choices about their relationships and being spiritually ruined by them. A great example from the Old Testament is Samson. He surrounded himself with friends who didn't know the Lord and was pulled down spiritually by those friends. Proverbs says becoming wise means that you are careful about who you choose to spend a lot of time with. Because who you pick to spend time with, and who you pick for your intimate friends, is going to shape the kind of person you are.

One of the most important issues in parenting is in assisting our kids to pick their friends wisely. Helping your children pick wise friends is way more important than helping your children choose the right major in college. It is more important than picking even the right college. Maybe we should hang posters of Proverbs 13:20 in our children's rooms.

Proverbs 13:20 (NIV)

20 Walk with the wise and become wise,
for a companion of fools suffers harm.

It is not good being alone. It is not good physically. It is not good emotionally. It is not good spiritually.

It is not good theologically

God in the Bible is presented to us not as a lonely, solitary, isolated being. The God that we find in the Bible is presented to us as a being who eternally exists, co-exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From the beginning of the Bible, we have a glimpse of this plurality in the Godhead. For instance, we read this in Genesis 1:26:

Genesis 1:26 (NIV)

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

There has been real debate among theologians for years about what the plural verb “Let us” and the plural pronoun “our” means. Some people say it is a plural of majesty, the way that kings and queens speak. “We are pleased to grant your request.” “We will accept your invitation.” Nowhere else in the Old Testament do we find the plural of majesty used of any other king. Some people say that God is speaking here to the angels, speaking to the heavenly court.

But I think the best explanation that we find a hint of even in the first chapter of Genesis is that there is a plurality in the Godhead. Certainly, the early church fathers believed

that the “Let us make man in our image” was an early hint of the Trinity that we find later in the New Testament. It is interesting as you read through the Old Testament how often there is the three-fold repetition of God’s name. Isaiah sees the Lord high and exalted in the Temple and the angels cry what?

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.

And in Revelation 4:8,

Revelation 4:8 (NIV)

8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“ ‘Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.’ ”

The name of God is frequently repeated three times in the Bible. So for example, we read this blessing:

Numbers 6:22–26 (NIV)

22 The LORD said to Moses, 23 “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

24 “ ‘ “The LORD bless you

and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face shine on you

and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD turn his face toward you

and give you peace.” ’

The Old Testament, I think, is pointing to the truth that we discover in the New Testament our God is a Triune God. The Lord, God the Father, bless you. The Lord, God the Son, make his face shine on you. The Lord, God the Spirit, turn his face toward you and give you peace.

What does all of this mean? Genesis 1:27 says this:

Genesis 1:27 (NIV)

27 So God created mankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.

To be made in the image of God is to be made in the image of one who is eternally in relationship, a being who exists as a love relationship. We were created for

relationship. So it is not good to be alone. It is not good for you physically. It is not good for you emotionally. It is not good for you spiritually. And it is not good theologically. When we live isolated lives we are denying who we fundamentally are. We're made in God's image.

So what is God's response to loneliness?

God's response to loneliness: The Church

Everywhere we find loneliness.

Everywhere loneliness

Rich kids whose parents travel or work all the time, who are left alone or to be tended by some nanny. Rich kids are lonely and isolated. Foster kids who have no sense of belonging anywhere and are moved from family to family feel lonely and isolated. Children from single parent homes who struggle with the loss of one of their parents through death and divorce feel lonely and isolated. Only children who long for a brother or sister, children from large families who feel lost in the crowd – there is almost no kid who doesn't feel lonely and isolated.

Single adults feel lonely and isolated. Many single adults believe: If only I was with someone. If only I had a spouse, then I wouldn't feel lonely and isolated. But guess what? Married people feel lonely and isolated too. Sometimes it is because marriage isn't all that great. Maybe the only thing people share is the same bed. Maybe the only thing they agree to is to stop talking. Even spouses in great marriages feel lonely and isolated. Young couples are so busy working, going to school, trying to make money. Young mothers may be struggling at home while their husbands are away on business trips. A husband can spend the night in a lonely hotel room. People work their whole lives looking forward to retirement only to have their spouse slip away into Alzheimer's. Friends move away. People change. Soldiers are sent overseas and miss their families. Kids go off to college. A person ends up in a hospital room by themselves. Folks are sent to prison.

Every where, all the time, we find ourselves lonely and isolated. We want to be cared about. We desire intimacy. We need relationship. What is God's solution for our loneliness and isolation? It's not just marriage; God's answer is not just family, or marriage, or sex, or FB and social media.

God's answer is the church. How does God heal loneliness?

Healing loneliness

1 Peter 2:9–10 (NIV)

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

God's kingdom creates the people of God

Here is the idea. From the beginning of the Bible to the end when God goes to work, he creates a people to live under his rule. Not just individuals. When God's kingdom comes, the mark of the kingdom's intervention in this world is that a people come together connected to one another who live under God's rule. You know the kingdom is there because you see a community of God's people emerging. In contrast with most contemporary views of Christianity, God is not primarily interested in just saving a bunch of disconnected people. God wants to save individuals, but God's primary interest is in forming a people of God. Listen to these verses from the Bible regarding the people of God.

Luke 1:17 (NIV)

17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Acts 15:14 (NIV)

14 Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

2 Corinthians 6:16 (NIV)

16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

Hebrews 4:9 (NIV)

9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;

Hebrews 8:10 (NIV)

10 This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Hebrews 13:12 (NIV)

12 And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

1 Peter 2:10 (NIV)

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Revelation 21:3 (NIV)

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

What is the central promise of the new covenant? What did Jesus come to do? Most of us would say that Jesus came to die for my sins on the cross. But here is the promise of the new covenant - what Jesus established by his blood,

Jeremiah 31:33 (NIV)

33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

This prophecy of Jeremiah is repeated over and over again in many different ways in the New Testament. I love the way the apostle Paul interprets the death of Jesus Christ in Titus 2.13-14.

Titus 2:13–14 (NIV)

13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

The biblical concern is not just on the individual, it is on a people as a whole. And though we enter salvation individually, one by one, salvation is never thought of as simply a one on one relationship with God. When an individual enters a relationship with God through trust in Jesus Christ, we are immediately joined to the people of God.

God's kingdom creates a new race

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

9 But you are a chosen people [lit. a chosen race], a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

There is a different Greek word in v. 9 where the NIV translates it "people" than in v. 10.

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You know, there are no verses in the New Testament that transfer more titles to ancient Israel to the church than 1 Peter 2:9-10. Everything that God intends Israel to be, Peter says to the church, "That's what God calls you." Peter says, "You are literally a chosen race." When God goes to work, when his kingdom comes, when God intervenes, God creates a new race of people.

This is an extraordinary statement about who we are. When you are filling out a census form and you are asked what is your race and you look down the list and it says Caucasian, African, African American, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander,

Peter says your first thought ought to be, “Wait a minute. They don’t have my race here. I’m part of a chosen race, a race that doesn’t obliterate our ethnic or cultural differences, but I’m part of a race of people from all cultures and all colors.” To be a follower of Christ is to be part of a new race. My primary identity is not where my ancestors came from, or the color of my skin. My primary ID is that I’m chosen by God to be in relationship with him.

Christians are not the white race. They’re the chosen race. We’re not the black race; we’re the chosen race. We’re not the red, yellow or brown races; we are the chosen races. And notice, God does the choosing.

SLIDE

God’s kingdom creates a chosen community

You say, “But why do I have to be connected to the church? I have a few good Christian friends that I totally enjoy relating to. These friends do not disappoint me the way the church has done. These friends are not weird. I’ve got my own little fellowship group at my college or at my work. I’ve got a few Christian buddies that I’ve been friends with for years. Isn’t it enough that we hang out together? What’s the big deal about connecting with the church?”

Let's be frank and say that there are many weird people in the church. I hate to break it to you, but you are someone else's weird person. There are needy people. There are people who say odd things to us. There are folks who lack social grace. There are people that you may not feel particularly comfortable hanging around with. There are people in the church who break commitments. Is it enough that you've got a few good Christian friends that you or you and your spouse enjoy going out to dinner with? Do you also need to connect deeply with the church?

C.S. Lewis, my favorite Christian writer, in his great book of essays called *God In The Dock*, said this:

When I first became a Christian, about fourteen years ago, I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and I wouldn't go to the churches and Gospel Halls; ...I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.

But you know, it is not just the recognition that in the guise of some odd or different person there may be a saint of God. The beauty of deeply connecting with the church rather than just gathering together with a few cool chosen Christian friends, the beauty of becoming part of a small group rather than just hanging around with a few chosen friends at your college or in your workplace, is that in small groups and in the church you don't pick the people, God does. So much of the growth that is going to take place in your life is the result of God putting you in the midst of a group of people that you haven't picked so that he, in his fatherly love and care, can put in your life the attitudes and qualities that will make you look like his Son Jesus Christ.

God knows our impatience, our lack of forbearance, our judgment of others, our pride and conceit, our sense of superiority, our petty preferences, our unwillingness to let go of grudges and hurt. He knows our racism. He wants to work all of those things out of you and me, but he can't do it unless we give him the sovereign permission to pick the group of people that he is going to surround us with. If we insist on always determining which people we are going to relate to, we are limiting what God can do in our lives. The beauty of deep connection to a church, the beauty of joining a small group, lies precisely in this: You don't get to pick the people. You let God in his sovereign love pick folks he wishes to surround you with.

Another way to put it is, our commonality is not merely natural. The reason why most people hang together is because they have some purely natural commonality. Well, we

all work together. We all went to the same college. We all are from the same little town. We all have the same background. We all have the same interests. We all live in the same neighborhood. We all are the same age. We all are married. We all have little kids. There is nothing miraculous about birds of a feather flocking together.

But the church is meant to be a miracle. When God goes to work, when God's kingdom comes, God creates a totally new community - a group which is together not because of any natural connections. God's kingdom produces a group whose commonness is created by the Holy Spirit. Me, as a Jew; you as a Gentile, Asian, Hispanic, Black, White, Single, Married, young, old, wealthy, poor, educated, uneducated, socially adept, socially inept – join together because we all have been led by the Spirit into this incredible journey of following Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ you and I become part of the people of God.

It is the people of God, the new race, God's chosen community, what we call church that is God's answer to human loneliness. It is not good to be alone. This new year, if you want to do one good thing for yourself, one good thing for your family, plunge more deeply into the church. Let's pray.

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Rich Nathan
January 11-12, 2014
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1 Peter 2:9-10

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