

“Increasing Your Social Capital” Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Intro: We live in a culture that possesses the ability to communicate like no other in the history of the world. While our communication might be characterized as easy, efficient, rapid, we could add another adjective to that list: superficial. You know this, right? You may have more followers on Twitter than Gaga and Bieber (almost 20 mill). You may 1000s of friends on Facebook, but what does that really mean?

Robert Putnam, a professor of Public Policy at Harvard, wrote a book about a decade ago entitled, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, and in his work he “warns that our stock of social capital – the very fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities.” When we speak of social capital we are saying our social networks have value. The people we know, the depth of those relationships, and the benefits that flow from those relationships determine our social capital. Putnam tells us loneliness, isolation and rugged individualism has exponentially increased in the United States over the last 25 years. Here are some of his findings:

- Attendance at Club Meetings drop 58%
- Family dinners drop 43%
- People are having friends over 35% less
- Church attendance is down 20%
- The amount of people who bowl is up 10%. The amount involved in leagues down 40%. Hence, the title...

So we see this tension of an ability to connect with people like never before *and* a growing disconnect between people at deeper and more meaningful levels.

Triune God: we are made in his image with a capacity for relationality. Gen. 1 & Gen. 3 – Sin entered, they hid from God and one another, and we immediately see that God made us for relationship and sin distorts those relationship.

Trans: This is what Ecclesiastes 4 is going to address this morning. The effects of sin on our relationships and God’s intended blessings for community.

The Point: Increase your social capital by living in community with others.

I. Reject enemies of biblical community (4:1-8; 13-16)

a) Oppression (4:1-3).

- It’s easy to go about our lives untouched by the evils and injustice in the world. We tend to walk through life with blinders on, and unless we experience a particular form of injustice, then we are prone to focus on our needs, our relationships, our work, our life.
- But the Preacher is not just focused on what is immediately in front of him, he’s is taking a holistic look at “life under the sun.” And what does he see? **Verse 1.**
- People are going to be in positions of authority and power. That’s a given, and there is nothing inherently wrong with leadership structures and positions of power. People can use their position and power to accomplish much good. The issue comes when people abuse their power.
- UNICEF (the United Nations Children’s Fund) reports that approximately 218 million children ages 5 to 17 work, with about 126 million working in hazardous situations (in mines, with chemicals and pesticides, and dangerous machines).
- Love 146, a non-profit organization, committed to combating human trafficking and slavery says that, Two children are sold into some form of slavery every minute. Added to that, over 100,000 children in the U.S. are forcefully engaged in prostitution or pornography each year.
- The Preacher was taking all of this in and the gravity of the evil in our world overwhelmed him. We see this in **verses 2-3.**
- Jesus, Man of Sorrows (**Is. 53:3**). **“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;”** Why? Life in this fallen world. He saw it more clearly than anyone and it broke his heart. Are you like Jesus in this way? Do you see the evils of injustice and oppression around you? Does it break your heart and move you to compassion and action?
- What’s the cure to oppression? Image of God (Dignity, Worth) **Proverbs 14:31: “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker”**

b) Envy (4:4-6)

- **Verse 4.** “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor.”
 - While the Preacher uses hyperbolic language, the general truth remains. Man’s work too often stems from the envy of others.
 - This “envy” refers to more than just a feeling of jealousy, but moves into the competitive spirit desiring “to outdo the other” (Murphy, 38).
 - We want to be better or appear like we’re better or have more than our neighbor. We’re constantly striving to “keep up with the Joneses,” or if you prefer the Kardashians.
 - Ex. – If our neighbor has a fishing boat, he wants a yacht. If the neighbors kids got new bikes, ours *need* a go-kart. If our buddy got the promotion on the job, you better believe it’s overtime for the next nine months, until we earn that same six digit salary.
 - Someone said: “We buy things we don’t need with money we don’t have to please people we don’t even like.” Pride is at work here. There is this drive for distinction...
 - To work out of envy and rivalry does not promote but undermines love for our neighbor. And yet, we’re so tempted to fall into this same trap that the writer calls vanity and a striving after the wind.”
- The Preacher offers a corrective to meaningless toil by offering two proverbs in verses five and six. Because there is value in work, one foolish extreme to avoid is laziness (v.5). **Verse 5.** Laziness is really another barrier to community, because we often find friends who have common interests in vocation, hobbies, & leisure. Lazy people find it easier to sit on the couch or take a nap, than to get involved in the lives of others.
- The other foolish extreme is to be a “slave to our work.” In verse 6, he provides some simple instruction (**read 6**). In other words, be content with what you have. Be content with less. It’s our inclination to desire two handfuls, to think two handfuls is always better than one, but The Preacher is saying, it’s better to have one and some peace and rest in life, than to live a life of envy and greed never finding contentment and rest.

c) Selfish Ambition (4:7-8).

- These verses portray the workaholic. He works and he works and he works. A forty-hour week is just the tip of the iceberg. “There is no end to his toil.” Work owns him.
- We discover the tragic description of this workaholic in the phrase, “who has no other.” He is, as the NIV renders it, “all alone.” What a depressing statement!
- He has no other. The idea is that he has no friend, business partner, no wife, not even a son or brother to could benefit from all of his hard work. He is working independently and has no one with whom he can share his wealth. He’s working hard but it’s all selfish labor.
- Illus. - If we were to interview him, it would be quite a simple conversation. “Who do you work for?” “I work for me.” “Why do you work hard?” “I work hard for me.” Who is proud of your accomplishments?” “Me.” “Well, what is that you hope to do with your earnings?” “Me.” And on the conversation would go. Me. Me. Me.
- And while most would think this would lead to some type of happiness, the text tells us “his eyes are never satisfied with riches.” The Preacher concludes, “This is vanity and an unhappy business.” Selfish ambition never brings true joy.
- The perils of failing to love our neighbor and reject these enemies of community are spelled out in vv.1-8. We also see some of these same principles surface in vv. 13-16 where we find a old king who did not want to listen to those around him. He rejected the blessing of community...
- Finish explaining 13-16...
- Trans: If those verses teach us the enemies to community, thankfully we find some positive instruction in verses 9-12. There are going to teach us to...

II. Receive the blessings of living in biblical community (4:9-12).

- It’s as if the Preacher is saying, “We’ve observed the foolishness of individualistic living, but now let me show you the better way. Isolation must take the back seat to community.”
- The key principle is discovered in the first five words of verse nine, “Two are better than one.” Unlike the workers of verses four and eight, we must realize the value of community and spiritual friendship. “There is strength in numbers.”

- But what exactly are the advantages of community over isolation? Verses 9-12 provide marks three distinct advantages of meaning relationships. Check them out:
- 1) Community promotes success in life... (Verse 9) (getting things done; working for a larger profit; ex.)
- 2) Community provides support & security in times of need (10-11).
 - Here, we have the picture of two travelers. It is said that those who traveled through Israel's cold winter nights, would sleep close together (Jer. 36.22,30) (Kidner, 94 & Garrett, 308).
- 3) Community provides strength when under duress (12).

We Need Each Other

- App: So what does all of this stuff about success and support and security and strength teach us? In short, we need each other. Don't make me start ripping of clichés and proverbs up here: "Light is the task where many share the toil." "There is no I in Team." "Together everyone achieve more." T.E.A.M together everyone achieves.. get it? We need each other.
- The early church got this! Acts 2:44 simply says: "**And all who believed were together**" (Acts 2.44) This should be true of us. We need one another.
- Check this out: The gospel creates a new people... Get to know Ephesians 2... Gospel of Grace Saves, Gospel of Grace Brings People together... "one man out of the two..." The most important thing about me is Jesus, not my background, not the color of my skin, not what is or is not coming in on the paycheck every other week, Jesus. That's the church.
- If we want to see the qualities of community displayed among us (success, support, security, and strength) then we need to be committed to one another. That is why the writer of Hebrews would say in Hebrews 10:24-25: "**And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**"
- Some will say (and perhaps you've even said or thought this before): "I don't need the church, I'm just fine, doing my own thing. I can read and study and pray *on my own*. I can love Jesus *without the church*." If that's where you are, let me give you a few encouragements:
 - 1) God made you for community. Just as he set eternity in our hearts, so he made us in his image with relational capacity and need. You were made for this.
 - 2) Living in community promotes humility. It's so hard for us to say, "I don't have it all together; I would be better if I spent time with those people," but that's exactly what we need to say.
 - 3) Community provides the context for us to live out the commands of Jesus. How can you live out the commands to "love one another" (Jn. 13.34), "Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6.2), "Be kind to one another... forgive one another" (Eph. 4.32), "teach and admonish one another" (Col. 3.16), "encourage the fainthearted, help the weak" (I Thess. 5.14), "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (Js. 5.16) and the list goes on and on and on. How are you going to live out his commands, by yourself? Good luck!!
 - 4) Love what Jesus loves. Ephesians 5 tells us that Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her.
- Have you benefitted from the community of faith? I have. I need your prayers on good days and bad. I need your encouragement to help me fight sin. I need your counsel to help me make wise decisions. I need you to speak the truth to me, to be there to support me, to walk through this life together. And so do you.
- This is going to happen on Sunday mornings, but it's going to happen at a deeper level in our Community Groups.

Community Groups

- Explain and Define them...

Consider the importance of Community Groups at Redemption Hill. Community Groups are the primary context where: 1) We live in biblical community. Live out the one anothers of Scripture. 2) We grow in grace. This is where we're going to apply the Word and become more like Christ as we follow him. 3) We care for one another. 4) We cultivate a missional lifestyle. 5) We invest in discipling relationship. 6) We develop future leaders. 7) We serve our community. 8) We care for our missionaries.

- That's the ideal. That's what we're striving for. That's why we want more and more and more people to get involved. I mean we're ready to start our 6th and 7th and 8th group. It's only a matter of time, and I'm excited to see many more of you get involved in our CGs, but let me say this.

- Community is work... Listen to what Jonathan Dodson says: **“COMMUNITY IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT. Community isn't an idea; it's real people, awkward, struggling, weird, different, funny, slow, arrogant, sheepish, humble, curious, skeptical, excitable. You get the idea. Jesus didn't die to make cliques. He died and rose to form diverse communities. Diverse and different is hard. It requires love, effort, and patience. Community doesn't just magically appear in a church. In fact, churches don't have community at all; they are community. The question is, “What will you make of the community?” I'm falling in love with messy, real community with people who are so different from me and yet so alike in Jesus. There's nothing like pursuing difficult people, being loved by different people, and serving alongside a diverse people. What a display of grace (nothing else could hold us together).”**
- App: This is happening at RHC. It is so cool seeing God make this value of community a reality in our church.
 - Someone recently had a death in their family and needed to help find babysitting help for multiple days. Within a few hours, three different couples from RHC responded to help.
 - I've seen people share their possessions. Give to help one another in times of need. I've seen people celebrate joys together and walk through difficult trials together.
- **Commit and invest. It takes time and effort. We all need this.**

Trans: Now, we have primarily focused on the blessings of community in a general way, but think for just a moment about how this plays out when we work and serve together.

Ministry is better when we work together

- Application to serving together... We are where we are as a church, in part, because we totally buy into this principle.
 - Leadership Team
 - Core Group
 - Serve Teams on Sunday
 - Serving through our Community Groups (4-6 efforts)

Conclusion:

God made us for community. Are you living in community with other believers? Are you taking opportunity to invest in this community of faith? I want to encourage you to not say “Yeah, one day I'll get on board with that. Oh that's nice for them, but I'm *so busy*.” (I get that, but take a step.) Find an extra 30, extra hour or two and you can be firing on all of these levels. We try not to complicate involvement at RHC. We're kind of like IKEA. They make their furniture in such a way that a guy that can barely swing a hammer or know a Phillips from a Flat Head can still put that puppy together. It's completely accessible. Like IKEA, we try to keep things as simple and seamless as possible to foster maximum involvement for the maximum number of people. That's just what we do. How will you get involved? What is the next step you will commit to take?

I want us to wrestle with this and pray about this. . . There are plenty of opportunities to get more invested in the community of faith here at Redemption Hill. Pull out your Connection Card – next Steps: on the back... CGs; Serve Teams; Membership: Next Connections Class is April 29th, after church, lunch will be served! Circle the date on your calendars... ☺

Listen, I'm not into guilting anyone into getting more involved here at Redemption Hill. That is certainly not the point. I don't see Jesus doing that in the gospels, and I'm not going there. The better motivation for pursuing community is the same as the foundation for community: the gospel. How will become a community that truly reflects the glory of God and the gospel? It will happen when we collectively commit to living out our faith in light of what Christ has done for us. To properly and most fully love those around us we need to know the God of love and be transformed by his radical love. When the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, his love frees us to love others. What does 1 John 4:19 say, “We love because he first loved us.” That's the gospel and that is how the gospel motivates our commitment to one another. The gospel of Jesus Christ drives us into community and drives us into radical, missional service, so that we can live as a city within a city and display the ultimate satisfaction that comes through Jesus Christ alone.

Let love drive you to greater involvement with God, his people, his service. Let's pray.