

Tonight, the Packers kick off their season with their longtime rival, the Chicago Bears. As Hank Williams, Jr., would croon, “*Are you ready for some football?*” (**picture**)

Football is a team sport. There’s no ‘I’ in TEAM. You could take the best player in the NFL, put him out there alone and he wouldn’t stand a chance against a team. For instance, Julio Jones (**picture**), who just happens to play for the Atlanta Falcons, is a great running back.

Can you imagine if he was playing alone against a team? “Here’s the kick-off, and Julio Jones takes it at his own goal-line. He starts out. He’s at the ten, he’s at the fifteen and, oh! He is leveled at the 12-yard line. First and ten. Julio Jones takes his own snap and he’s tackled for a ten yard loss. What do you think the final score would be? Julio Jones is good, but he couldn’t even beat a local high school team by himself. He needs a team.

Christians need a team, too. Joel Rosenberg (**picture**) writes in his book, *The Invested Life*: “*Christianity is not a solo sport. It’s about building strong, healthy teams of fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ whom God can use to change the world. It’s about older believers taking younger believers under their wings to love them, help them grow in Christ, and help them reproduce their faith in the lives of other younger believers. Making disciples of all nations can only be done one person at a time.*”

God never intended you to live the Christian life alone. He loves groups. He created all the animals to be in groups. We have a lot of strange names for groups of animals. **Do you know your groups of animals?** What do you call a group of sheep? A **flock** (**picture**). What do you call a group of cattle? A **herd** (**picture**). How about a group of fish? A **school** (**picture**). A group of wolves? A **pack** (**picture**). A group of lions is called a **pride** (**picture**). and a group of bees is called a **swarm** (**picture**).

Those are fairly familiar, but there are some other group names for animals that you might not be familiar with. **How well do you know your groups? School started this week, so let’s take a little quiz.**

A group of rabbits is called a **warren** (**picture**). A group of quail is called a **covey** (**picture**). A group of mice is called a **mischief** (**picture**). A group of whales is called a **pod** (**picture**). A group of vultures is called a **venue** (not menu) (**picture**). A group of raccoons is called a **gaze** (**picture**). A group of porcupines is called a **prickle** (**picture**). A group of penguins is called a **rookery** (**picture**). A group of lizards is called a **lounge** (**picture**). A group of bats is called a **colony** (**picture**). A group of stingrays is called a fever (**picture**). But my three favorites are...a group of giraffes is called a **tower** (**picture**). A group of rhinos is called a **crash** (**picture**). And a group of hippopotamuses is called a **bloat** (**picture**).

So what do you call a group of disciples? A church. God saved you to put you in a group. There’s no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian. Tonto. God’s plan for your life is that you’ll link up with a group of believers.

The church was born on the Day of Pentecost almost 2,000 years ago. Peter preached the gospel and 3,000 people were added to the church that first day. As the church exploded with growth, we learn how the early Christians functioned. God designed us for groups.

This morning as we launch our Sunday morning Grace groups, we’re going to focus on the importance of small groups in the church. Please turn to Acts 2:42-47 (p. 911). This passage makes it clear that the early disciples had two different venues for gathering together. Thousands of them gathered together in the Temple Courts and then they divided up into small groups in homes. Let’s borrow a term from our Children’s Ministry and call those two experiences, *Big Church* and *Little Church*.

The church in Jerusalem continued to grow. In Acts 4:4 we read that the number of men in the church was at 5,000. That doesn’t include women and children. How could a huge church of thousands of people function?

The same way we do. Again in Acts 5:42, we read about *Big Church* and *Little Church*. “*Day after day in the temple courts (Big Church) and from house to house (Little Church), they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*” If you truly want to be a healthy, growing disciple of Jesus, you need two different group experiences in your life. You need both *big church* and *little church*.

1. Believers participate in “Big Church” worship. The Bible says the disciples met together in the Temple Courts. Josephus tells us that the size of the temple courts was six *stadia*. That’s the word that gives us our English word “stadium.” A stadia was six hundred square feet, so that means you could fit twelve football fields on the temple mount. That was the only place in Jerusalem where several thousand people could gather.

Can’t you picture those early believers gathering and singing the Psalms, hearing Peter or John talk about the things Jesus had done and said? In the same way, we gather together in big church to worship God and proclaim His Word. The Bible directs us to gather together and worship God. Psalm 34:3, “*Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.*” Showing up for worship is a vital habit for a disciple.

2. Believers participate in “Little Church” fellowship. In the Bible the “church” isn’t a program or a building or something you go to. It’s something you belong to. It’s a relationship. There’s no such thing as a growing solo Christian. Every Christian needs to join and get involved in a local church. You’re called by God to do so! You have spiritual gifts God intended to be used in a church like Grace. Churches aren’t for attending. They are for joining!

One reason that God calls us to join a church is because a church provides benefits you can’t get on your own. There are *five metaphors* of the church in the New Testament, each of which helps us understand these benefits. So, with the time we have left, let’s look at them.

First, the New Testament says that the church is a family. Ephesians 2:19, “Now therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints of the household—or *family*—of God.” **In God’s family, I learn my true identity.** A church family helps you understand who you are and why you’re here.

One college prof used to tell about how college students would come in his office and say something like, “I’m going to take a year off from my studies so I can find myself.” The professor laughed and said, “No student ever came back and said, ‘Prof, I found myself—just south of Chicago.’”

We can’t find ourselves or learn our true identity on our own. We need the help of others. Our relationships help define us.

Here’s a few examples of what I mean: *I’m a son. I’m a grandson. I’m a father. I’m a husband. I’m a pastor. I’m a friend. I’m an American.* All of these relationships help define who I am and why I am here. You could make a similar list. But if my relationships get broken or are poor, then my identity is threatened. Anyone who’s gone through a divorce knows after the divorce they ask, “Who am I now?” Because their relationship, their identity, was tied to that person.

Or when someone has been married to someone for a long time and their spouse dies, it’s very normal for people to think, “What now? Who am I now? What’s my place? What’s my role? My identity is not the same.” Most earthly relationships don’t last. They change or end. Even our identity as Americans could change. We have no guarantee that the U.S. will last any longer than any other nation has. The Hittites are gone—the Romans are gone—the Babylonians are gone. If the Lord tarries, there’s a good chance America will be gone someday.

This is where the benefit of a church family comes in. Christ’s Church will never end. A healthy local church is full of people who know they’re spiritual brothers and sisters. These super-siblings, “*friends who stick closer than a brother*” remind us that we’re a part of an eternal family.

Down South churches often affirm this with terms like “Brother” or “Sister.” Whether we use those terms or not, we’re a family. If God is your Father and God is my Father, then we’re siblings!

The wonderful fact is that as a Christian, you have siblings all over the world. It’s another reason it’s so important to join a church wherever Uncle Sam or your company sends you. We all need the connection of a healthy church family. That connection reminds us of our true identity. It reminds us that we’re first and foremost a child of God.

Fred Craddock (**picture**) was a seminary professor who taught preaching down south. One summer Craddock was vacationing with his wife in Gatlinburg. They were eating breakfast at a little restaurant in that Smokey Mountain town, hoping to enjoy a quiet meal—just the two of them—and that’s the way they wanted it. While they were waiting for their food, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests. Craddock leaned over and whispered to his wife, “I hope he doesn’t come over here. We’re on vacation and I just want to be left alone!” But sure enough, the man did come over to their table.

In a friendly voice he asked, “Where are you folks from?” “Oklahoma,” Craddock answered—a bit tersely. The stranger didn’t notice and said, “Splendid state, I hear, although I’ve never been there. What do you do for a living?” Attempting to disguise his occupation for fear of even more interaction, Craddock, said, “I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University.” The man said, “Oh—you’re a preacher! Well I’ve got a great preacher story to tell you.”

And with that, the elderly gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down at their table. Craddock winced and said to himself, “Great, just what I need another preacher story!” The kind old man ignored Craddock’s facial expression and said, “See that mountain over there?” pointing out the restaurant window. “Not far from the base of that mountain, there was a boy born to an unwed mother. He had a hard time growing up, because every place he went, he was always asked the same embarrassing question, ‘Hey boy, Who’s your daddy? Whose son are you?’ Whether he was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, ‘Who’s your daddy? Who’s your father?’ This boy would hide at recess and lunch time from other students. He would avoid going in to stores because that question hurt him so bad. It was agonizing to be reminded of the fact that he was illegitimate. Things have changed since then—but in those days, being born out of wedlock was a shameful thing.

Well, when this little boy was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to his church to lead a revival. That’s another change. Revivals were a big deal in those days. The boy would go to the services with the rest of the town—but he

would go intentionally late to avoid having to talk to anyone. And he'd slip into a back seat so as to be able to leave before the others. He did everything he could to avoid hearing someone ask him that painful question, 'Who's your daddy?'

But one night the preacher said the benediction quicker than normal and the boy got caught up with the rest of the people as they left the church. The boy tried to hurry out but about the time he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, 'Son, who's your daddy? Who's your father?'

The whole church got deathly quiet. The boy could feel every eye in the church looking at him. He felt so embarrassed—he knew what they were thinking. He could feel the judgment in their eyes. He didn't want to tell this preacher—what everyone else already knew. But the evangelist sensed the situation around him and using discernment that only the Holy Spirit could give, he smiled and said, 'Wait a minute! I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. Son, you are a child of God!'

And with that he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.' The boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person. He was never the same again. Whenever anybody asked him, 'Who's your Daddy?' he'd just tell them, 'I'm a Child of God.' And from then on the people of that church welcomed me in that way."

So, this distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, "Isn't that a great story?" Craddock who'd now been enthralled agreed! And when the gentleman got up and turned to leave, he said, "You know, if that new preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!" With that he walked away. Craddock and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over and asked her, "Do you know who that man was who just left that was sitting at our table?" The waitress grinned and said, "Of course. Everybody here knows him. That's Ben Hooper (**picture**). He's the former governor of Tennessee!" Then, Fred Craddock remembered that on two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected an illegitimate man to be their governor and their guest had been that man.

That's one wonderful benefit of the fellowship of other Christians. They help you learn as a Christian, you're God's child. That first and foremost, that's your identity. It's who you are! Isn't that a wonderful benefit?

Here's a second metaphor. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 says, "*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*" Here's the benefit this metaphor teaches...**In God's Temple I'm supported by others.** Like the columns of a temple that holds the entire structure up, members of a local church hold each other up. They help them as they endure the storms of life. In a church we're not alone.

As we all know, there are times in life when we need others to hold us up—times when we can't stand alone. In the local church, like 2 x 4's nailed together, we get the inter-connectedness that we all need. That's wonderful because we weren't meant to go through life UN-connected or alone. We need people who help us bear our burdens. We need others to help us endure life's trials. Many of us can testify that the best "others" are our spiritual brothers and sisters, members of our local church.

Many of you have had Christian friends, fellow church members, who've persisted in holding you up. It's a wonderful benefit of Christian fellowship. I know I wouldn't have made it through the difficulties of life without Christians, fellow family members, like you.

Our third metaphor of fellowship is found in texts like Romans 12:5 where it says, "*In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*" Here's the benefit...**In Christ's Body I discover my unique value.** This reminds us that like different parts of a body—we each have an important role to play in the church.

Look around. We're all different. Do you see any other "you's" looking back? No, of course not. We're all unique. We have different talents, insights and spiritual gifts. We have different life experiences. That's God's plan. He loves variety so He made us different which means we all have a unique and important role to play.

1 Corinthians 12: "*The body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*" Did you get that? You can't be what God purposed you to be without doing your part in a church family.

Without a local church you're just a "hand" or a "nose" floating around on your own. Every part of the church is vitally important. Every person is incredibly valuable. Every one of our church members is awesome. Every single member of this church has incredible value.

I constantly pray that God would let us reach more for Christ, not so we can be a "big" church. But the more *family* members we have, then the more folk we will have reaching our community for Christ. Every believer has gifts a church needs to do what God calls us to do. The more members we have, the more we can do for God. There's nothing more exciting than doing things for God together, things we couldn't do alone. Each of us finds our true value, as members of churches like this one.

When I was hospitalized with pneumonia a couple of years ago, I'll never forget Mike Wiemer checking on me or Debbie Ranke stopping in to pray for me before she began her nursing shift that morning. I got home and Dave and Montez Thompson brought chicken and dumplings over. And I've lost count of how many times God has used different ones of you to encourage me and my family through now three decades.

Each of us has a role. There are no small parts. It's what 1 Corinthians 12:22-23 says, "*Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts [of the body] that we think are less honorable we treat them with special honor.*" In a church family, you learn that God made each of you unique. You each have an important part to play in the local church—and that gives you confidence and value.

Here's the fourth metaphor. In John 10 Jesus said, "*I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They'll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd.*" Here's the benefit...**In God's flock I'm protected and cared for.** Isn't that important? A very precious thing in this fallen and failing world of ours!?

Barbara Brokhoff tells the story of a group of American tourists taking a bus tour in Rome led by an English-speaking guide. Their first stop was a basilica in a piazza, which was surrounded by several lanes of relentless Roman traffic. After they were all safely dropped off, the group climbed the steps for a quick tour of the church. Then they spread out to board the bus, which was now parked on the other side of the street. The frantic guide shouted for the group to stay together. He hollered out to them, "*You cross one by one, they hit you one by one. But if you cross together, they think you will hurt the car! They won't hit you.*"

That's the way a church is—in a local church you find people to stand with you in this fallen world. Life is full of times when we need others to stand with us. But there's more to it than that. In a local church where you get to know others, that fellowship gives you people who will care for you when you need it—whether that caring means just sitting with you when you're grieving—or giving you a ride to the doctor—or bringing over a meal when you just got out of the hospital—or babysitting your kids so you and your husband can have a date night—or just a friendly ear when you need someone to listen. When we allow Jesus to use our hearts and hands and feet to minister to other church members—it's a wonderful thing.

Okay, here's the final metaphor. It's in verses like 1 Corinthians 3:5-8 where Paul says: "*I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. You happen to be God's field—God's garden—in which we are working.*" Here's the benefit...**In God's Garden my life becomes productive.** Jesus referred to this aspect of church fellowship in John 15 when He said that a branch that is severed from the vine can't produce fruit. God has incredible fruit for His kingdom that He wants to bear in your life. He can't do that unless you are connected to the Vine. A local church is where you learn to do that. It's where you connect to the vine. It's where you become a part of God's garden. A church nurtures you—grows you—admonishes you—"weeds you" when needed—helps you discover your spiritual gifts—all to help you bear fruit.

In his book, *Witness Essentials*, Daniel Meyer (**2 pictures**) shares the story of an elderly woman who heard a sermon in her church, in which she felt God encouraging her to look for ways in which she could use her particular gifts and situation to minister to the needs of others.

She thought about her gifts and realized that she'd been told by others that she had the gift of hospitality. But she lived alone in a small apartment near a large university and had afternoons free. She pondered the needs around her and the people who tugged at her heartstrings. To her mind came the students nearby who were so far away from home. Then an idea both strange and simple suddenly arose. She got a stack of three-by-five cards and wrote on each one the following words: "*Are you homesick? Come to my house at 4:00 p.m. for tea.*"

She included a phone number and address and then posted the cards all around campus. After a slow start, homesick students began trickling into her house each week for tea. When she died ten years later, eighty honorary pallbearers attended her funeral. Each one of them had been a student who, once upon a time, found a hot cup of tea, a sense of home, and the gospel of Jesus in the hospitable heart of this faithful servant. Who can guess all the fruit that came from the life of this woman?

How much fruit are you bearing? How are you changing this fallen world for the better? You can't do that—without being a part of a local church—where you find people who help you grow.

Conclusion: There's more to the Christian life than just believing. It's vital for Christians to belong. The best way to build Christian relationships is to be a part of small group where someone knows your name and where you can enjoy fellowship and ministry.

In 1957 Paul McCartney and John Lennon (**picture**) were introduced by a mutual friend at St. Peter's Church in Liverpool. In the cemetery of the church, there was a tombstone engraved with the name *Eleanor Rigby*, who died at age 44. Nine years later, Paul McCartney wrote "Eleanor Rigby," a song that has been called the anthem of lonely people:

"Ah, look at all the lonely people / Ah, look at all the lonely people. / Eleanor Rigby, picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been. / Lives in a dream. / Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door. / Who is it for?"

Father McKenzie, writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear. / No one comes near. / Look at him working, darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there. / What does he care?"

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name. / Nobody came. / Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave. / No one was saved.

All the lonely people. / Where do they all come from? / All the lonely people. / Where do they all belong?"

I've got the answer. Lonely people belong in a local church. They belong in a small group of Christians who will befriend them and love them as a brother or sister in Christ. It's impossible to build strong relationships in big church. That only happens in little church fellowship.

Are you part of a little church? Are you in a small group? They're starting today! Please join one!