

Sophie and Shirley, two elderly widows in a Florida adult community, were very curious about the latest arrival in their building – a quiet, nice looking gentleman who kept to himself. So Shirley says, “Sophie, you know I’m shy. Why don’t you go over to him at the pool and find out a little about him? He looks so lonely.” So Sophie agrees and later that day at the pool, she walks up to him and says, “Excuse me, mister. I hope I’m not prying, but my friend and I were wondering why you looked so lonely.”

“Of course I’m lonely, he says, “I’ve spent the past 20 years in prison.” “You’re kidding! What for?” “For killing my third wife. I strangled her.” “What happened to your second wife?” “I shot her.” “And, if I may ask, your first wife?” “We had a fight and she, well, she fell off a bridge.” “Oh my,” says Sophie. Then turning to her friend on the other side of the pool, she yells, “You’re never going to believe this, Shirley. He’s single!”

Have you ever been so desperate for a friend that you made a poor decision? God designed us to be social creatures. Our need for friends is one of our most urgent ones. At some level we all yearn for friends and long to interact with people. We need other people who care enough to help us make it through this life.

As our Owner’s Manual says, “*it is not good for man to be alone*” (Gen. 2:18). We’re designed for relationships. We’re wired with a desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, to serve and be served. We’re created to be in relationship—with God and with other people, other image bearers of God. We were designed for community.

What’s more successful a church of 5,000 or 12? Most of us think 5,000. Though Jesus did a miracle and fed 5,000, real success came from those 12 ordinary men we know as the disciples. Since the days of the early church, God has used small groups, what we call Grace Groups, to produce spiritual growth. Please turn to 1 John 1:3-4 (p. 1022). “*That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*”

The word fellowship is the word *koinonia*. It’s a New Testament word used 19 times in the Greek New Testament. It means “community, partnership, fellowship.” It’s used for a vital aspect of Christianity. It refers to that special fellowship that only those who know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior can have. We’re not designed to be Lone Rangers. We’re to be a family of Christ-followers, who acknowledge Christ as head, who relate to each other in a way that reflects Jesus’ sacrificial love for us all.

God uses small groups to help us grow, just as He did with Jesus’ disciples. During the week of September 12th we’re launching our Grace Groups. We have four to choose from on two different nights.

But maybe this is all new to you and you wonder why we have them and why we believe they’re so important. That’s what I want to explain this morning. Nothing meets our need for relationships like a healthy church family. Today’s message is all about connecting in small groups and the importance of our Grace Groups.

1. Godly connecting happens best with a small group of people. None of us can successfully connect with hundreds or thousands of people. We’re just not capable of making this happen. We can have hundreds of acquaintances but we can’t connect with that many people. Even if you have a thousand Facebook friends there’s no way you can really connect with all of those people. We may know the names of scores of people, but it’s impossible to significantly connect with more than a few. We can only truly know and be known by a few. But too many of us settle for knowing a bunch of people casually. Most would rather have lots of acquaintances instead of a smaller group of friends that we truly connect with.

God has called us to go much deeper than that. His plan is for us to connect. God doesn’t want us to just have casual acquaintances.

Every person needs a group outside of their family. The New Testament refers to this as an *oikos*. What’s an *oikos*? It’s the Greek word translated as *household*. Sometimes it was translated as a house. Other times it was used to refer to a family. In the New Testament it’s used several times as a circle of people that you care for, a group of people who you know and who know you personally. It is a group of friends you’re connected with.

Remember in Acts 16 when the Philippian jailer asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul told him to repent of his sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you and your *household* will be saved. What he was saying is that if you let Jesus come into your life not only will you be changed, but also your circle of family and friends. Everybody needs a spiritual *oikos*. We need a group of people that connect with us.

Acts 11:14 (*The Message*) “*Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’ll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.*” In other words everyone you’re connected to. Everyone you care

for is translated as an *oikos*. It needs to be a smaller circle. We can only truly connect with a small group. Sadly, outside of our biological family, most of us aren't connected and it costs us.

2. Small Groups can make a big difference. Jesus believed in small groups. He had twelve disciples whom He hung out with and lived life with. And He also had a smaller group than the twelve. He had three (Peter, James and John) that He was even more intimate with. It was almost like they were a unique small group for Jesus.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane just before going to the cross, He took Peter, James and John with Him. He had twelve, but He also had an inner circle of three. This was an *oikos* within an *oikos*. *Why?* Jesus knew that small groups could make a big difference.

Small groups within a church undercut the holy man, holy place myth. The idea for many about church today is that we have a holy man called a pastor in a holy place. We go to a holy building with a holy man. But in Matthew 18:20 Jesus said, “*for where two or three come together in My name, there I am with them.*” Jesus wasn't talking about a holy man and a holy place. He was talking about the fact that when two or three people come together in the name of Jesus, He's in the midst of them.

Church is not somewhere you go, it's who we are. We're the church. When we meet in His name spiritual community happens. Small groups are important because they model this principle. Spiritual community can happen in a family room or in a park. It can happen at Starbucks and even in a car when people begin to lift up the name of Christ. Spiritual community happens when anybody gets together in the name of Jesus.

One of the problems that we have is that we've made Christianity a set of beliefs instead of a way of life. Christianity is not just a set of beliefs, it's also about how we live. It's a way of life. We're the church. Some think that church is a building where you come to hear music and a sermon. Church is the people. It happens when people meet in the name of Jesus.

Small groups empower believers to serve. This is a beautiful thing! Too many churches are set up in such a way that most spiritual gifts can't be used. There are people who attend here who can speak, counsel, pray, sing, and other things that we may know nothing about.

How many of you understand that we all have gifts and talents? God wants us to use those gifts to advance His kingdom. The beauty of small groups is that a lot of people can be used by God. Small groups give people an opportunity to serve when normally they'd never get the opportunity. “*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace*” (1 Peter 4:10),

What happens in a small group? People who would never get an opportunity to use their gifts and talents in a group setting are enabled to allow the grace of God to flow through their lives to minister to others.

Small groups create a network of care and accountability. Small groups allow accountability to happen naturally. We all need people to nudge us and encourage us. Sometimes we need someone to remind us of what we said we were going to do. It doesn't mean that people are going to be on you like a pit bull.

How many of us have plans to begin exercising or to start a diet? If you try to do it alone, it may or may not happen. When you have others partnering with you, it encourages you to make it happen.

Accountability happens naturally within a small group because that group becomes people who care about you and that you care for. Many of us would avoid foolish decisions if we had someone to hold us accountable.

How many dumb decisions have you made because you didn't have anyone close enough to tell you that what you are about to do was going to be a big mistake? The Bible says that there's safety in the multitude of counselors. Within these small groups you're going to connect with people that have already been through what you're going through.

Have you ever heard this statement, “*A friend is someone that accepts you the way that you are?*” That's only partly true. A true friend speaks truth into your life. A true friend is someone who will remind you of what you said that you were going to do. Not because they're a nag, but because they care and are your friend.

These are face to face relationships. There's this whole idea of care. We all have one thing in common. We're either in a crisis, coming out of one, or getting ready to go into a crisis.

Because our world is contaminated by sin, difficulty happens. Problems happen. The beauty of a small group is that there is someone who is there for you. They know what you're going through. When you're in the middle of a crisis, it's too late to connect. You have to be connected before you go into a crisis and one of the best ways to connect is in a small group.

54 times in the New Testament we are told things that we should do for one another. *Love one another. Pray for one another. Bear each other's burdens. Confess your faults to one another. Forgive one another. Be kind to one another. Greet one another. Comfort one another. Encourage one another.* Why do we care? Because Jesus loved us enough to die for us.

In a small group we have the privilege of being Jesus to each other. It's hard to do that in the large setting. It's why you have to be connected with a small group. The Bible says that we are supposed to encourage one another to do good works. It's accountability.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NLT) *"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the Day of His return is drawing near."*

We need to think of ways to encourage each other. When was the last time you thought of ways to encourage someone else? When was the last time you thought of ways to be a blessing to someone else? Joy doesn't come from self-care but from love and caring for others. The most miserable people you'll meet are those who are continually focused on themselves. They think about themselves, talk about themselves, when they're with others they're still talking about themselves. It's a formula for misery and sadly, it's self-inflicted. Caring for others brings joy.

Then it says let us not neglect our meeting together. It's very hard to connect without physically seeing the people you're connected with.

He also said, "Don't quit meeting together as some are doing." Why are they not meeting? Today they'd say they're too busy. I have kids. I got hurt the last time. I need "me time."

Finally, he said to encourage and warn each other. This is care and accountability. We need to do this especially now that we see the day of the Lord approaching. Now more than ever we need to be connecting. You need to be in Christian relationships where there's love, care and accountability more than ever before.

Small groups provide an environment of growth. This may come as a shock to some of you. It doesn't matter how much you read your Bible. It doesn't matter how much you pray. It doesn't matter how devoted you are to God. You will never develop spiritual maturity until you connect with others. Christianity doesn't work by yourself. It's not a self-study plan. You must have others.

Discipleship is all about relationships. Jesus said, *"Go into all the world and make disciples (plural) baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost."* What does this mean? Win people to Christ. Baptize them. Lead them to make a public confession.

In the New Testament baptism was an identity. It was assimilation. I used to be a child of the dark, but now I'm a child of the light. Baptism said that I'm with these people. I belong. I'm now part of the group.

We're to lead them to faith and connect them with the body of Christ. They can't be a free flowing individual. Connection is a must. Ephesians 4:15, *"Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ."* When people who care about you (love you, are connected to you) speak truth into your life then you're able to grow up into maturity. Spiritual growth is stunted by being a loner. You need connections. You need a community.

Small groups give you the chance to be annoyed once in a while. Some don't want to be part of a small group because they don't want to be annoyed by someone they don't like. Maybe you thought of a name. Your name was probably thought of too.

We've heard it said, "Choose your friends wisely." While it's a well-meaning statement, it's not true. This may surprise you, but most of us don't choose our friends. Friends happen.

Think about some of your friends. If you were choosing friends would you have chosen them? We all have friends that we have difficulty with and struggle to like. But life put us together and God uses it to knock off some of our rough spots. He's using it for our good and His glory!

You help them and you're there for them, but you really don't like them all that well. There's something about being in a relationship when someone irritates you. It's then we learn the application of the fruits of the Spirit, love, patience, gentleness... Staying in a relationship with someone who annoys you helps you grow spiritually.

You probably don't want to be in a group with people that you don't like. But think about this. You're going to be in heaven with people that you don't like. Get over it. We all have a bad day. We all have a bad week. God puts us in the middle of this. Being connected has positive things, but it also gives you a chance to be annoyed...and as a result grow in grace.

Jesus said anybody can love the loveable. Anybody can be patient with people they like. Can you hang in there even if they're annoying you? This is maturity. This is friendship. This is connecting.

1 Peter 4:8-9, *"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."* What does this mean? It means that love overlooks a lot of stuff. Love bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things.

Have you ever had someone trash talk another person that you love? What happens? We begin to defend that person. Even if we know what they're saying is true. *Why? Love!*

Peter finished the verse by saying welcome people into your home and don't grumble about it. Do you know that the word *home* in this Scripture is *oikos*. It means to let people into your space and don't grumble about it.

Small groups give us the chance to grow in ways that you've been trying to grow for years, but haven't been successful. They give you a chance to see that church happens when people get together in the name of Jesus.

You'll be able to connect deeper. You will be able to use your gifts. You will be cared for and held accountable. They will teach you how to love at a level that you couldn't do all by yourself.

So, BE PROACTIVE—GET INTO A GROUP. We have four of them starting the week of September 12th, that we'll repeat again in 2022.

Most of us need to learn about *friendship*. How do I know? Well, answer this – if you had an emergency at three in the morning, other than your family, who could you call? If you blew it, who could you share that with and not fear rejection? Most of us need to learn about *friendship*.

Most of us need to learn *a biblical worldview of work*. If you hate your job, if you live for the weekend, if you're already dreading Monday, if you don't see your workplace as an opportunity to serve Jesus – then you need to grow and learn *a biblical worldview of work*.

Many don't know the *basics* of what it means to be a Christian and live the Christian life. We need help learning those *basics* of the Christian life.

And it's obvious that we need to learn to *trust God* more.

Too many of us do not have an *oikos*. Most of you do not have people that you meet with on a consistent basis to connect, that are like a spiritual household for you. It's why we have a lot of work to do.

Proactive simply means to take some initiative and do something. We can talk about our lack of connecting or we can do something about it. I can't make anything happen, only God can make things happen.

But at Grace, we're working hard on creating an environment where connecting is easy. We're working to make this readily available to you.

Conclusion: Dr. Henry Cloud (**picture**) in his book, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth* writes, “*Virtually every emotional and psychological problem, from addictions to depression, has alienation or emotional isolation at its core or close to it. Recovery from these problems involves helping people get more connected to each other at deeper and healthier levels than they are.*”

What's the bottom line? God designed us for each other. We're made to need each other. We're made to live in close community with each other. We are made to live out faith in relationship with each other: receiving grace, receiving gifts from God and receiving healing for our souls because of the faith of faithful friends.

You need a group. Are you in? Please sign-up today!