

The Tie That Binds

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 25, 2023.

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:1-16).¹

It would appear that this fourth chapter is an assortment of unrelated topics. But upon closer inspection, we see a repetition of introductory phrases, "better than," carried onward from the previous chapter. Solomon is clearly building his argument, which he will carry forward to its conclusion at the end of the book. But this chapter, short as it is, is not merely a building block, but a thematic treatise. It has an important message for us, especially in the church today, even *this* church today.

To draw out this theme, let me remind you of God's assessment, in the beginning, of man alone: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). And so God created Eve (Praise be to God!), and the two became one, enjoying the companionship and union according to God's design. And then they sinned, not divorcing their union, but plaguing their companionship and subsequent relationships, the family, the church, the world. But despite the catastrophe and consequences of the Fall, it still is not good for man to be alone. We were made for community. And, this is no more relevant than in the church. In fact, the thrust of the apostle Paul's argument in the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians is that the church is one body made up of many essential parts, living together in the love of Christ. There is no church of *one*.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Of course, we are inundated with examples of the erosion of God-given community. Sometimes it is the tragic result of oppression, where people are treated like property. Other times, it's the self-induced result of envy, where people are treated like tools. But in Christ, we enjoy a tie that binds us together in community, in fellowship, and yes in friendship.

When people are property

The word “oppression” is overused and misused today, to the point of meaning fatigue. Let this not be the case here, where Solomon uses the word repetitiously, and therefore with significance, describing what he saw: “all the oppressions ... of the oppressed ... [by] their oppressors” (4:1). (Sounds oppressive, doesn't it?) But what does Solomon mean by this word?

In context, we read of the “tears of the oppressed,” the “power” of the oppressors, and circumstances so grim that death would be better than life. We find elsewhere in Scripture examples of what Solomon describes, specifically fraud and theft of the vulnerable (Lev. 6:2-5), financial manipulation and unjust profit by the powerful of the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers (Ezek. 22), and the loss of rights and justice of the weak (Jer. 22). Such examples lead one commentator to helpfully define “oppression” as “accumulation—seeking after profit—without regard to the nature, needs, and rights of other people.”² In other words, the oppressor sees and uses people as property.

Solomon is not alone in what he sees. We see it too. Perhaps it's the widow who is swindled out of her savings by fraud. Perhaps it's the child sold into sex slavery. Perhaps it's the victims of the Nazi atrocities of the Holocaust. Modern examples run the gamut, reminding us that there is no end to the wicked devices of the human heart.

But within Solomon's description of the oppression that he saw, that's not all he saw. Don't miss it: “And behold ... the oppressed ... had no one to comfort them ...” He repeats, “there was not one to comfort them.” The oppressed are alone, even isolated, contributing to suffering. Job encountered tragedy after tragedy, and though his friends were undiscerning and often unhelpful, they were at least present, even initially sitting with him in silence (Job 2:11-13). But what about those who are oppressed *and alone*?

Solomon thinks that death would be better, or even better to have never been born at all. He's not anti-life but using hyperbole to make a point: There is something worse than oppression, to be oppressed and alone. And such a thought should grip us, sparking our compassion, mobilizing our presence in the lives of others. For, our Lord Jesus had compassion on the afflicted, who “were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). In his name, let us do the same, even if simply in our silent presence, perhaps weeping with those who weep (Rom. 12:15), comforting those who need us.

² Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 103-104

When people are tools

How different God's economy is from man's! God's economy is one of giving, man's is one of greed. In the 1987 movie "Wall Street," character Gordon Gecko summed it well when he said,

greed ... is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind."³

Perhaps the movie script writer had read Ecclesiastes, because that's what Solomon saw: "all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor" (4:4). Though God gave man the blessing of working and cultivating creation together (Gen. 2:15), our sinful nature pitted Cain in jealousy against Abel, in a survival of the fittest. In man's economy, there are no brothers and sisters only winners and losers, and Abel lost.

There are of course different forms of envy and greed. Some conquest and conquer, but others dropout and disappear, latching on like leeches to an economy to which they contribute nothing. A friend of mine who worked at a homeless shelter said that there are four types of homeless people: the mentally ill, the truly destitute, the abused, and the dropout. The first three, he said, need our help; the fourth needs to go to work. Solomon says, the drop out "folds his hands" (4:5), an idiom meaning he does not use them to work.

But sometimes our hands may be open, even both hands, but we fill them with greed-induced strife. Solomon says he knew a man so consumed with growing his wealth that it consumed him. Never satisfied, he wanted more and more. But the worst part was he had no one to enjoy it with, no one to give it to. Like the king of Solomon's concluding parable, who rose from rags to riches (the American dream come true!) for what? What is the legacy of wealth and power? Less than you think: "those who come later will not rejoice" (4:16) in it or you. Enjoy your friends today and be a friend to others and beware of envy.

Because, envy of others will drive you to places you never thought possible, to irrational thoughts and actions, justified only in your envy-consumed mind. If your reward is two hands full of toil and strife, what is your gain? Far better is contentment, one handful with quiet. Jesus said, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). The dropout and Gordon Gecko are alike in this: they see people as tools to be used (or manipulated) rather than loved and served.

When people are friends

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Jeffrey Meyers summarizes the first twelve verses of this passage as a mathematical equation: "In verses one through three of chapter 4, zero is better than one. Then, in verses four through six, we read that one [handful] is better than two. Climatically, in verses seven through twelve we find that two are better than one."⁴ It's a creative way of

³ <https://www.shmoop.com/quotes/greed-is-good-misquote.html>

⁴ Quoted in Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2014), 100.

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seeing the thread of friendship through this passage. Two really are better than one, in time of need, whether cold or threat. But even better is the “threefold cord” of community. We were not created to be alone but living in community together. This is why Christian community is so important and why the devil will do what he can to destroy it.

The body of Christ “does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor. 12:14). It would be absurd for the eye to say to the hand or the head to say to the feet, “I have not need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21). Yet, envy slithers its way in, even in the church, leading to callous hearts, unforgiving spirits, and wills bent on divisiveness. I’ve seen all three and the embodied result ... just plain misery.

It’s sad and tragic but worse the envious person misses the blessing that God gives in the community of his people. I am blessed to call you not only brothers and sisters but friends. I am a blessed man because I know that I do not toil alone. I am a blessed man because I know that if I fall, you will lift me up. I am a blessed man because I know that you care for my well-being. I am a blessed man because I know that you will take care of me. And I’m not alone, because you could say that same thing.

For, in Christ, we are not oppressed but comforted, not envious but content, not alone but living in community. But the community that we enjoy is not the product of our social efforts. The tie that binds is the love of Christ, and his Spirit manifesting that love in our fellowship. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus gave two, both are relational: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). We relate to God in love, and we relate to people in love, not by will power nor works but by the grace of God in Christ.

What can make the bitter person, who harbors anger toward someone else, forgive? The love of God in Christ. What can heal hurt, mend relationships, and build them back stronger? The love of God in Christ. What can turn a church full of sinners into a fellowship of friends? The love of God in Christ. And so, the friendship of fellowship that we enjoy is not of us but from him, through him, and for him:

Blessed be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love:
the fellowship of kindred minds
is like to that above.⁵

⁵ “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” Trinity Hymnal, Revised Edition (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 359.