

NO ONE STANDS ALONE
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

I. INTRO

- A. Some things in life are just **too** obvious. Comedian, Ken Davis, writes about some real life signs that fall into that category.

*On packaging for a Rowenta Iron: *Do not iron clothes on body!*

*On a Korean butcher knife: *Warning. Keep out of children!*

*On a Swedish chain saw: *Do not attempt to stop chain with your hands.*

Ken writes, "...there's a large billboard you can see right before the exit to the Louisville Expo Center. It announces, "Tattoos while you wait." Excuse me, but isn't waiting a pretty solid requirement for getting a tattoo? *Tattoos on the go* are pretty much out of the question. I can't even conceive of *Tattoos while you jog.*"

1. There is a statement in the Bible that is almost that obvious. Let me read it for you: ***If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are ALONE when they fall are in real trouble (Eccl.4:10 NLT).***

I've met people who want to be **left** alone, but who don't really want to **be** alone. I've met people who snarl and bite when you try to help them, but they don't want to **be** alone. I've met people who, I suspect, spray themselves regularly with people repellent, but they don't want to **be** alone.

-People can pretend to be too cool for friends and play **hard-to-get** whenever anyone tries to get close—but when they fall; when life goes off the rails—I can guarantee you that they **long** for the closeness they've always resisted.

2. I'm not clairvoyant—I just know that we were made in the image of God—and, therefore, we were not made to be alone. When God created all life, he was checking it off—earth...good; sky...good; water...good; insects...good; snakes...(long silence) good; goats, cows, beavers and deer...good; man...not good. Can anyone think of why he would create a man and say, "not good?" It was **not good** that he was **alone**.

- B. If I could reassure you of one thing this morning, it would be this. The God who created this universe cares about your feelings of aloneness far more than you would ever dare dream. He never intended that you or anyone else in this world would be isolated—or alone.

1. So, why is it that sometimes we find ourselves feeling so lonely? If we hate aloneness and **know** how important relationships are, why don't we build our lives around them instead of filling our lives with other things and trying to stuff them into the cracks? Good question!
2. If you live very long on this planet—you will face a tough time. And when you do—the no-brainer is—you won't want to face it alone. So, what I want to do this morning is lay out the basics in loving and building strong friendships so you never have to. I want The Olive Branch to be a place where **NO ONE stands alone!**

II. SHORT-CUTS, BANDAIDS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

A. Ecclesiastes was written by someone I believe to be one of the most brilliant persons who ever walked on this planet. His name was Solomon. If you know anything about him, you know that, by most standards, he had everything. Looks, fame, intelligence, success—and more money than he could ever spend in a life time. Get this—God was so pleased with Solomon that He appeared to him one night in a dream and said, “**What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you (1 Kings 3:5 NLT)!**”

1. But somewhere along the line, Solomon got jaded and started questioning everything he had believed was true. This book is the journal of his journey. Listen to what he says:

I observed yet another example of meaninglessness in our world. This is the case of a man who is all alone, without a child or a brother, yet who works hard to gain as much wealth as he can. But then he asks himself, "Who am I working for? Why am I giving up so much pleasure now?" It is all so meaningless and depressing.

Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one; they get a better return for their labor. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble. And on a cold night, two under the same blanket can gain warmth from each other. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken (Eccles.4:7-12 NLT).

-From cover to cover, the Bible tells us that community—close friendships and accountability are directly related to the health of our lives. Science tells us that isolation is worse for your health than smoking, drinking, and eating steak. According to Jesus, God measures the significance of our lives by one standard; love. Loving God and loving others.

2. We **all** understand this. But understanding is really not the issue. Neither is desire, unless we've been badly hurt. The issue is more one of “how?” I thought it might be good to just get **real** basic. Let's talk about what friendship is **not**.
 - a. Friendship is not trying to get someone to take care of you. The truth is that no one is waiting on a park bench somewhere, waiting to nurture you, muck over you, sooth you, and listen endlessly to your tale of woe and trouble. -We live in an “**it's-all-about-me**” world. If you assume that in a friendship—you'll wreck it because most people walk a wide circle around that stuff.
 - b. Friendship is not latching on to someone who has a life, because you've never gotten around to having one yourself. And it's not about hooking onto a rising star and riding them like an elevator to the top to advance yourself professionally or financially or politically. You can't build a good friendship on that kind of stuff. You don't **use** friends.

- c. Friendship is not anonymously baring your soul in your favorite chat room and spending hours with cyber people.
And friendship is not what happens in a therapist's office for 100 bucks an hour. If you think I'm wrong, just try not paying!
 - d. Friendship is not pretending to care about someone so that they'll join your group or buy your product or come to your church.
- B. Friendship, according to what the Bible teaches, is the intentional decision to do life with a few other people you've grown to care about. To do that, you have to be willing to be **known**. You can't stay in the shadows. Friendship ultimately means entrusting your heart to one or two or three people—and leaving your own agenda behind. Friendship means building into someone else—even when it costs you. It's resisting the urge to impress others into liking you, the urge to be independent and self-pre-occupied and narcissistic.
1. Now, what do you think is the biggest barrier that keeps people from this kind of friendship? I think its fear. "What if I let someone get close enough to me to see my failure file—the part of me that I'm disappointed with and ashamed of? Rejection is **worse** than being alone!"

-I've been rejected—and it's pretty painful! I think it's John Ortberg that compares finding a good friend to two porcupines trying to get close enough to stay warm on a cold night. It's true! Sometimes we can be pretty prickly. We get defensive, proud, self-righteous—we want close friends who are always there for us and always tell us how wonderful we are! Right?
 2. I heard something recently that really helped me to understand friendship in a new way. It's simply this—that the best gift we give in friendship is our **spirit**. When we offer love and friendship—we offer either a generous spirit or a selfish spirit; a proud spirit, or a humble spirit; a loving spirit, or an apathetic spirit; a genuine, transparent spirit, or a mask; a kind spirit, or a mean, sarcastic spirit. -And **we** are the ones who control the building of our spirit. What kind of spirit we have to offer has a **huge** impact on friendship. And the only One who can help us build our spirit right and guard it properly is the Spirit of God.
 3. Now, there are a **lot** of factors that affect our spirit—the kind of person we are on the inside. Let me tell you how a lot of people turn into porcupines. It's when their spirit gets wounded for some reason—and they don't take of these wounds—and they get infected.
 - a. Now, has anyone made it so far through life without getting an emotion scratch, bruise, cut, or brush burn? In a world like ours, that's **impossible!** And it happens in churches. Know why? Because churches are made up of people who are **learning** how to love—and how not to be stupid and arrogant and selfish. Sometimes people just make stupid comments about what you wear or how your look or about your kids behavior. "Wow! What great slacks! A little tight—but nice. You look like a whole pig stuffed into a cocktail weenie, dear!"
-So, you're standing there worshipping, "Jesus, I love you so much"—I'd

like to bust her chops—who does she think she is?—“Jesus—you’re so kind and good”—Why do jerks like him have to come to **my** church!

- b. Please understand—if you are serious about pursuing friendship—it’s not like you **might** get hurt, get nicked, get brush burned—you **will** get cut, nicked or bruised! If you’re looking for **safe**, well, the human race may not be for you!
4. What do you do when you get wounded? Anyone know? At the age of about 11 or 12, I apparently didn’t. I was at summer camp and was pretending to slide into home base—and got a brush burn on my leg. I stuck a Band-Aid on it without washing it out—and really didn’t think too much more about it. Then it started to get red and sore and white in the middle. But then I had a problem. See, the camp nurse was really pretty—and I knew for her to look at it—I’d have to pull down my pants. And as an 11 year old boy, **I wasn’t about to pull down my pants**. Not in front of her!
-Well, this thing got more and more nasty. One day when we were about to go swimming, I thought, “It’s the perfect time! I’ve got a swimming suit on—I can show this thing and not get embarrassed!” So I did. Mrs. White took one look at this red, swollen sore with pus oozing out of it—and took me to a doctor. It was the **ultimate** humiliation! He made me pull down my pants and gave me a shot of penicillin—right in my little white butt. **Right in front of Mrs. White**. Even that didn’t cure it. That thing festered all summer and kept me from a whole bunch of things I wanted to do. I still have a scar—let me show you...
- I’ve learned something about infections. They can kill you. And emotional dings, brush burns and cuts can and **will** get infected to.
You **have** to clean out that wound—and forgive, let it go—or your spirit will get infected with bitterness. Anyone ever been around a bitter person? Not much fun, is it? It’s like spraying yourself with people repellent.
- Just a word here. Some of you are pretty good at giving dings. It’s like you’ve **got** to dump your load, throw your dart, be sarcastic, share your opinion—even though no one asks. You need to know that this is not just a bad habit—it’s wrong and it’s dangerous. The Bible warns about careless words—and you need to know that your careless words will alienate you more than you’d ever dream. The question is—is it **worth** it?
5. There’s something else you need to do with a wound. Close it up. You can’t close it up before you clean it out—but once you clean it out—then you need to close it—and not keep opening it up and showing people. “Look what happened! Isn’t this awful? Don’t you feel sorry for me?”
a. There are some people who, if get near them, want to do a show-and-tell on all the relational boo-boos, brush-burns, and cuts they’ve ever gotten. Anyone know what happens to a wound if you keep opening it up? It never heals. And doing that virtually insures that we’re going to become a porcupine—person bristling with negativity, anger and self-pity.

- b. Now, is it right or fair that someone has dinged you, cut you, hurt you? Of **course** it isn't. So, why would you let them continue to hurt you by keeping the wound open and letting it sabotage friendships?
-Know what can happen if you allow God to heal your spirit? God can use what you've experienced to make you a gorgeous person—with a spirit that is good and loving and kind and compassionate. God **will** do that for you—but you have to allow Him to clean it—keep it clean—and then bind it up and close it so it can **heal!** People who have been wounded—and healed—make excellent friends.

III. GETTING ON THE SOLUTION SIDE OF ALONENESS

There are some very practical things you can do to build good friendships. You have to remember that friendship is an **active** verb, not a **passive** verb. Sometimes I hear people say, "This church isn't a very friendly place." Then I watch them after a gathering run for the door—never look anyone in the eye and **offer** friendship. There's a reason for the phrase, **making friends; building friendships**. Friends don't come out of box. Deep friendships are not something you buy and keep; friendships are something you **build** and **maintain**. They take time, effort, money, risk, and patience.

- A. Let me read one of the best definitions of friendship I've ever heard. It's found in the Bible, and I believe it comes from the heart of God. The word love is used, but I'm going to substitute the word **friends**.
Friends are patient, friends are kind. Friends do not envy, they do not boast, they are not proud. They are not rude, self-seeking, or easily angered, and they keep no record of wrongs. Friends do not delight in evil, but rejoice with the truth. Friends always protect, always trust, always hope, and always persevere (1 Cor.13:4-7 NIV).

-Let me just say what most people notice. Some people seem to have as many friends as they want. It makes you want to scream, "That's so **unfair!**"

-I mean, what is it? Genetics? Coolness? Attractiveness? "The **Zone?**" Well, truth is that there are recognizable traits in people who excel building friendships. Some time ago I read a book called **The Friendship Factor** by Alan McGinnis that took some of the mystery out of this for me.

1. The first, and probably foremost quality that defines the friendship factor in people's lives is that, for them, **love is their top priority**. People who have close friendships **truly believe** that people are a basic source of happiness in life.
 - a. I've chosen a Daytimer to represent this value--because how we spend our time says a lot about what we value most in life. We **make** time for the things that we value in life.
-It takes time to plan a supper together. It takes time to go running, play golf, make phone calls, write cards, take trips, go fishing, to visit. Friends make time for each other.
 - b. I've got to ask you: What place do love and friendship have in your life--**really**. Like—in your Blackberry or Daytimer—or whatever you use to order

you time. We take time for the things we **value**.

-One psychologist I read talks about an encounter with a highly successful neurosurgeon who felt totally alone. This is what he said, "I guess I'm messing up all my relationships.

All these years I've fought to get to the top of my profession, **thinking that when I got there people would respect me and want to be around me. But it just hasn't happened.**

-He's obviously a smart man, but he's got the friendship thing backwards. You can't impress people into being real friends.

- c. So, how are you doing on this? Have you ever consciously assigned top priority to your friendships?
2. There's another factor in building close, solid friendships. It's illustrated by this piece of glass on this picture. Transparency. You have to cultivate transparency so people can see who you are and know you.
 - a. Know what the truth is about me? I **want** people to know me. Not just surface stuff because that doesn't feel real. But I want people to know what goes on inside my heart--and still love and respect me. It's called intimacy. It's what makes marriages work--and what makes all good friendships work.

-Know why? Because all deep relationships are built on truth. Ever been at a big party where everyone's dressed to kill—and doing image-management big time? You can't build **anything** on that kind of foundation—because lies always keep people at arms length. It's **tough** to let someone see you without your make-up--the good, the bad, and the ugly. But when you do—and you find out they still love you, it's one of the most freeing and **beautiful** things you'll ever experience.
 - b. By the way, transparency is not the Jerry Springer Show. It's not becoming an emotional "flasher" to anyone who happens to walk by. who walks by like you're an emotional "flasher."

-Transparency is allowing a few people inside and, over time, letting them know what breaks your heart, what you're afraid of—even where you've failed. And when that happens—it's like walking on sacred ground. I admire people who aren't afraid to talk about their failures. Their dreams. Their fears.
 - c. What keeps us from being transparent? That's a no-brainer. It's fear. And we **need** to be cautious—but don't let fear keep you from the closeness your heart craves!
 3. The third **friendship factor** is learning to communicate warmth. To not just **feel** affection and warmth for people—but to actually pull off the insulation and **tell** them. I've got a blanket not here to demonstrate this quality.
 - a. Bill Hybels tells the story of having a Dad tell him how his heart was bursting with so much love and pride for his teenage son. The irony was

that the son had talked to Bill just days before about the frustration and anger he felt because he didn't think his Dad even loved him.

- c. Psychologists call this warmth, **generating an emotional field**. When people know how to communicate affection for and acceptance of others--there is a kind of invisible, but perceptible aura of warmth around them that keeps drawing others in.
-How do you do this? Well, like anything else you have to practice. You make mistakes. For guys, it sometimes feels like they're wearing little white gloves and carrying a purse. It's awkward. So, you have to decide—someday when I really need close friends, will my porcupine imitation serve me well?" If not—**get over it!** Keep trying until it begins to feel natural.

4. The fourth **friendship factor** is to learn the gestures of love. This little can would probably not win a decorator's award, but my daughter Kelly gave it to me when she was little, and it says, "I love you, Dad!" Four words that makes me feel warm inside. If you were to come to my office, you'd understand that the most valuable things are not my degrees—they're mementoes of love.

-Folks, let me tell you something about love. Love is not just a **feeling**, something you **fall into**--kind of like stepping in used dog food in the back yard. Sometimes you have to **act** before you **feel**.

- a. I have a close friend who gave me this expensive multi-use tool that I rarely have occasion to use--but it was his, he liked it, and wanted me to have it. It almost got me kicked off a plane once. I gave him a set of socket wrenches of mine I really liked. And he uses them on his truck.
- b. There are lots of gestures that express love. Eating together. Gifts say, "I was thinking of **you**." Remember what it says about friends in the verses I quoted earlier?
Friends are **kind**. Kindness has a way of endearing us in deep ways to people. And **it takes so little to do it!**
- c. Let me ask you; what is keeping you from expressing your love in tangible ways? Simple ways that could make a **huge** difference in your friendships?

5. The fifth and final friendship factor is this: Create space in your friendships. That's what these styrofoam peanuts represent. Whenever you're moving something that's valuable, you pack the extra space with these so it doesn't get scraped or chipped. Simple put, good friends resist the urge to over-advise, dominate, control or judge their friends. They're okay that their friends **aren't** like them. .

- a. See, we all have this longing for friendship, but we also have this longing for freedom. And we long for friends who will set us free and not manipulate us--jack us around.
- b. Three suggestions. Be cautious with criticism, be careful to express your acceptance, and give them lots of space to be close friends with others.

- B. It's interesting—as I was thinking about these characteristics that enable us to get close

to others, I realized that God is an expert in all of them. By the way, did you know God was pursuing a friendship with you? That's what His love is all about—about you allowing Him to be close enough to be your Friend—and you being close enough to be **His** friend.

1. Friendship flourishes with people who make love a priority and believe that relationships are a basic source of happiness.
 - That's what God is all about. Love. **Love** is what summarizes Jesus' life. When asked to summarize what God wants most in us—Jesus said, "Love! Love God—put Him first; and love others!"
 - a. See, Christianity is not about rules and creeds and buildings and services. It's about relationships. A relationship with God and a relationship with others. Even the cross represents that with a vertical and horizontal piece that meet in the middle. Following Jesus is about doing life with other imperfect people—learn to love and be loved and serve and be served. It's not about making yourself good enough for God; it's about letting yourself get so close to God—that He transforms you; how you think, how you act, how you live, and how you love. And in the process you become the person you never dreamed you could be.
 - b. Know what the church was designed to be? Not a place where everyone puts on a mask and comes once a week to pretend--but a place where people can be real with each other, grow to love each other—flaws and all—and pursue close friendships that last beyond this life and extend to the next.
 - Remember Solomon's comment at the end of his thing on friendship—how a cord of three strands is not easily broken. I've often wondered if those three strands are me, someone else—and God. I do know that since God is the creator and giver of all love—He can help us in amazing ways with our relational intelligence.
 - But that starts by letting His love—and His life into our hearts. He gives power to love, to change, to be patient, to say, "I was being stupid—I'm sorry". He's the one who heals our spirit and makes it whole and good—cleans out the infection so it doesn't get infected and bitter and mean. God has all the time in the world for **love!**
2. And the **transparency** thing? God has been perfectly transparent with us. He's shown us what He's like—as much as we can understand. And to make sure we really understand, one day He set aside all his splendor and power and came as one of us. And He lived, and loved and walked and ate and slept and spoke—and then died, naked, splayed out on a cross.
 - He simply asks us, "Will you be honest and transparent with me? 1 John 1:8-9 says, ***If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins—make a clean breast of them—he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us from all wrongdoing (1 John 1:8-9 Msg.)***
 Friendship with God starts with that kind of transparency.

3. Think about how He communicates warmth? God has been very clear in telling us that He loves us. Jesus said it best the night before He died.
My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command (John 15:12-14 NIV).
- God warms us from the inside out. When we invite Him, He comes to live right at the core of our being through the Holy Spirit. And his love warms us. Know how it's possible to be wrecked by guilt and shame your whole life? He can wash that away. Know how it's possible to feel really ugly and unloved? His warmth can make us feel like a treasure. It's like He holds our hearts in His hands—and slowly warms it and brings it back to life. God does warmth *really* well!
4. God's clear expression of His love for us brings us directly into the fourth friendship factor: that love is something you do. And God has shown us gesture after gesture of love.
- a. Every day, God gives life, resources, freedom and opportunities to millions of people who thumb their noses at Him. Over and over every single day of life—every breath, every bite of food, every time our children come home safely—is God saying, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you! He does it because the word that best describes Him is *love*.
 - b. If you want a picture of love—it's Jesus hanging on a cross—His arms nailed open as He died as a permanent expression of friendship. Love, friends, doesn't get any more profound than that. In opening His heart like that, God risked ultimate rejection. People reject that invitation every day. If you're tempted to reject it, understand--it's an invitation for you to be loved more deeply than you have been loved in your life.
 - c. Know what we're all looking for in our quest to find the perfect friend, the perfect parent, the perfect spouse. It's unconditional love. Someone who will love us deeply, even when we fail, even when they know all the bad stuff about us—and still accept us and value us.
 -You need to know that there is no person like that on the face of this planet. That vacuum inside that longs for that is longing for God—and it will **stay** empty and unfulfilled until you let him have his rightful place there. What you need most—in this life, and the next, is to accept God's offer of friendship—paid for with Jesus' blood.
 -And if you will accept His offer of friendship, God will make his love and warmth real. If you cooperate--He will teach you how to become a really, really good friend and companion.
5. The final friendship factor is also a part of God's love. Space. God gives space to every person—to either accept or reject his offer. If you choose to worship yourself, your stuff, or success—or anything else, He will give you the space to do

that. And I just need to ask you--what's the inclination of your heart right now—this morning? God offers His Heart to you. It's your move.

PRAYER

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. Remember how I talked about roots last week? How it's the roots of a tree that keep transporting water and minerals—even when it's dry? How that it's **roots** that keep a tree still standing—even when the wind has it doubled over? Relationships are those roots—your relationship with God—and with others. Once a windstorm starts, it's too late for a tree to send down roots to brace it. Once a drought has begun, the tree will die before it can ever get its roots deep enough to hit the water table. That's why trees start growing them immediately.
- B. You need roots. We have called our small groups here **ROOTS**. It's because you and I need friendships with others—and a deep friendship with God. To be the people we are called to be—we need to love and be loved, know and be known, serve and be served, celebrate and be celebrated. Everyone needs roots. But, see, here's the deal. You have to grow the roots—no one can grow them for you. So, why don't you get started? For your own sake—start growing them.

-Let's be a church where **no one stands alone**. How about if we commit to each other that we will come here—not seeing this place as a shopping mall where we get what we need and go—but where we come wanting and expecting to give our love and support. Agreed?