

Ecclesiastes 4:7–12 | “1 + 1 = Better”

Preached on May 17, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 4:7–12 today. *[pauseee]*

We are continuing in Ecclesiastes, and it has been showing us life in this fallen world. *[pause]*

Solomon reported all of the things that he “saw” like: injustice, oppression, death, as well as envy-driven effort.

Now, we will see more of what he “saw,” so listen as I READ it for you. *[READ 7–12]*

In this passage, the author talks about the need for others, and what a relevant topic this is for our day. *[pause]*

We live in a time when isolation and distance from one another are common. *[pause]*

Instead of meeting and talking in person, we just text. *[pause]*

Instead of interacting with people, we now have to interact with automated messages on the phone. *[pause]*

We can stay at home and do much of what we used to have to go out and do. *[pause]*

You can shop solely online, if you want, and stream movies by yourself in your living room.

Likewise, with the click of a button, groceries can show up on our doorstep, and you don’t have to interact with a soul. *[pauseee]*

Now there’s nothing inherently wrong with these things, and in some ways, they can aid us.

But the cumulative effect on us is that now we tend to do things more by ourselves than with others. *[pauseee]*

So, instead of asking someone to come over and help me fix something, I can YouTube it. *[pause]*

Instead of asking a neighbor for a cup of sugar, I can order it online, and it can be there in a couple hours, if I really wanted it to. *[pauseee]*

All of these things together cause us to be more independent-minded than socially-minded.

We think of ‘me’ instead of ‘us,’ and many wonder, “What’s the big deal, if I don’t interact much with others?” *[pauseee]*

Our relationships are no longer as deep nor as strong.

Our conversations are shorter, quicker, shallower—our time with others dwindling. *[pause]*

It's no longer, "I need you, and you need me," but "I got this all by myself." [pauseeee]

This way of living has actually affected us in that we are more lonely than ever. [pause]

Back in 2023, the Surgeon General at the time, put out an advisory titled, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation."¹ [pause]

He noted research that indicated that, "In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness." [pause]

He highlighted the fact that, "Americans appear to be becoming less socially connected over time."

And he also pointed out that, "In 2018, only 16% of Americans reported that they felt very attached to their local community." [pauseeee]

This wasn't only the Surgeon General, for the World Health Organization called loneliness a "passing health threat." [pause]

They even formed a commission that discovered "that social isolation and loneliness are widespread across every region and age group."² [pauseee]

It's this theme of living alone vs. living in community that the passage before us talks about.

And what we will discover is that way before the Surgeon General and the World Health Organization...

The Bible has been emphasizing the importance of living in community with others. [pause]

So let's see what God teaches us today...first, we see...

I. The woeful picture of one person working hard only for himself.

A major theme of Ecclesiastes is *vanity*. [pause]

He speaks of how so many things are empty and fleeting, for they do not provide us with lasting significance, value, or meaning.

Well here, Solomon once again speaks of something that is "vanity under the sun." [pause]

So at the beginning of verse 7, he gives us a pre-warning, "Hey guys, what I'm about to talk about is vanity," and what is it?...

It's a person who works hard only for him or herself. [pauseee]

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

² <https://scienceinsights.org/why-who-declared-loneliness-a-global-epidemic/>.

Listen to what he saw in verse 8, “One person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil.” [pause]

Here is a guy who has no one else—he has no family. [pause]

It sounds like he is an only child of a couple, and he never got married and had kids when he got older. [pause]

It also appears like possibly his parents have died off, so he’s all left alone.

And the way it’s written makes it sound like he’s a very disconnected, lonely man, for there is no mention of friends or community that he works hard for. [pauseeee]

For some people in our day, they would say, “What’s wrong with this? He can live for himself, and not have to worry about sacrificing for others.”

But in reality, it’s a sad picture and it’s supposed to make us feel like this is a woeful situation to be in. [pauseeee]

So here’s this man, and you would think that his life would be filled with joy, contentment, and ease, for he only has to work enough to provide for himself.

But that’s not what actually happens, instead, even though he has no one else, “there is no end to all his toil.” [pauseeee]

You are supposed to think, “Wait a second, how is that possible? If it’s only *you* then the food, housing, bills, and everything else are supposed to be minimal.” [pause]

It’s not like he has to work hard to feed a family of 6.

It’s not like he has to support his parents, so why is there no end to his toil? [pause]

We find the reason right after this: “his eyes are never satisfied with riches.” [pauseeee]

The cause of his overworking is an *insatiable greed*. [pause]

This shows us that his excessive toil is not out of necessity.

It’s not like he just really has a lot of bills to pay for, and that’s why there’s no end to his toil.

No, this endless toil is self-inflicted. [pause]

He always has to have “more.”

He works himself to the bone to get *just a little more*, and then just a little more after that, but it never stops.

He never reaches a point of satisfaction—vanity! [pauseeee]

This shows us that for the greedy person, more is never enough, and if you are all about money and things, understand that you will never be satisfied. *[pause]*

Oh, how many need this message!

So many are working themselves to death in order to obtain more money, more things, more this, and more that.

But it won't ultimately bring them what they are looking for—vanity, vanity! *[pauseeee]*

Consider whether this portrait is of you. *[pause]*

Do you overwork due to discontentment? *[pause]*

You feel the desire for 'more' constantly chirping in your heart, but understand that riches do not satisfy.

No amount of things will do the trick, it's like feeding a bottomless pit. *[pauseeee]*

We see here that even if you had no one else to pay for or support, you wouldn't be satisfied with riches—vanity, vanity, vanity! *[pauseeee]*

Not only is this man not satisfied, but we also see that he doesn't enjoy life.

The verse says, "He never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and *depriving myself of pleasure?*'"
[pause]

Due to working all day long, everyday, he finds no time to enjoy the good things of life or experience happiness. *[pause]*

This is like many Americans: they are wealthy, but they work so much that they never actually enjoy what they have. *[pause]*

They have a massive home that they're never at. *[pauseeee]*

Something else that this man's example shows us is that he never evaluates the "why" of his toil.
[pause]

The verse says that "He never *asks*, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?'"
[pause]

He doesn't stop and consider his reasons, but just acts out of his desire. *[pause]*

If he took some time to self-evaluate, he would see that he was living foolishly, but there's none of that going on. *[pauseeee]*

If you tend to be an overworker, do you ever stop and ask yourself, "Why?" *[pause]*

Have you ever drilled down to your motives? *[pauseee]*

This is a woeful picture of a person who lives for himself, but who ends up empty.

And Solomon calls it “vanity and an unhappy business” at the end of verse 8. *[pauseee]*

This example was surrounded by statements on how it is vanity, and that’s because this whole, lone ranger, selfish endeavor is encompassed by emptiness. *[pause]*

It is a miserable, unpleasant, sad, and wretched affair. *[pauseee]*

When you live for yourself, you will not find joy nor contentment in this life, and this is because life is not meant to be lived alone! *[pause]*

Life is not meant to be a selfish endeavor, but one characterized by sacrificial love for others. *[pauseee]*

Many in our world would lift up this man as a prime example of “the good life.” *[pause]*

They would say, “Look, there’s no one who he has to sacrifice for, and give up his time for, or spend his money on, but *all* of his time and money are *his!*” *[pause]*

But the Bible is telling us that it’s the opposite: it’s a miserable and worthless way of life. *[pause]*

Commentator Duane Garrett said that for a person like this, “Money is their only kin,”³ and what a horrible “kin” to have, for it doesn’t bring contentment nor love you back. *[pauseee]*

Do you live for yourself? *[pause]*

Even if you have to sacrifice your time and money, do you ever dream of living for yourself? *[pause]*

Disregard that thinking and remember what a woeful picture it really is. *[pauseee]*

Compare how often you think, “What do *I* need and want?” versus, “What do *others* need and want?” *[pause]*

When you come to church, are you thinking only about how *you* need encouragement, or do you consider how you could encourage *others*? *[pauseee]*

We can be so self-focused and independent-minded that we don’t even realize how little we think of others and put them first.

³ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 307.

So let's catch ourselves more, and take time to evaluate and really ask ourselves, "Why am I doing this?" *[pause]*

Let's see the woeful emptiness of living for self, and be drawn outside of ourselves to look towards others. *[pauseeee]*

So we saw the woeful picture of one person working hard only for himself, but now we see the other side...

II. The wonderful picture of two people working together.

Things work wonderfully when we work together with others. *[pauseee]*

A sniper in a battle needs a spotter to help him shoot his target, and a soldier can provide cover for his comrade. *[pause]*

Likewise, a pilot and co-pilot can work together in an emergency to avoid disaster. *[pauseeee]*

I think of Olympic rowing...

One person can row, but when two people are synchronized in their rowing, they can go so much faster. *[pause]*

When we work in tandem with others, we can do great things, and this is why verse 9 says, "Two are better than one." *[pauseeee]*

Solomon would admit that one person can do things—it's not like they are incapable of doing anything by themselves.

But look at how he puts it: "two are *better* than one." *[pause]*

So it's possible to live on your own, but living with others is 'better.' *[pauseee]*

Notice that he didn't say that this is the 'perfect' way to live, for it's not like living in community with others makes life perfect and without any problems...

Rather, it's a better way to live than by yourself. *[pauseeee]*

We are always looking for better ways to do things, or better products, or better this or that, well here's a better way to live: live in community with others! *[pauseeee]*

This shows us that life is not meant to be lived alone.

Go all the way back to Genesis 2:18, where God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

And then when Eve is brought to Adam, Adam can't help, but rejoice—we need each other! *[pauseeee]*

What's interesting is that Solomon calls *a lot* of things vanity, but this is one of the things that he doesn't call 'vanity.' [pauseeee]

Here in this text we are given the reason for why it's better, it's "because they have a good reward for their toil." [pause]

That word 'reward' here is the wages or benefits you get for what you put in. [pause]

If you notice, the guy, who was on his own, back in verses 7–8 worked hard and didn't really get anything in return, but when two work together, there's a reward...

Their efforts are rewarded. [pauseeee]

It's not always easy working together with others.⁴ [pause]

You can't call all the shots, choose the timing, or the way that you are going to do everything. [pause]

You have to listen to another person's thoughts, consider them and their needs, and adapt to their pace, but when all is said and done, the Bible is saying, "It's better." [pauseee]

In the moment, it doesn't seem ideal, but in the end, there's a greater reward. [pauseeee]

Now you may still be wondering, "Why are two people better than one, and what is this reward?"

Well verses 10–12 give us examples of what he's talking about. [pause]

There are three given here, so that we do not miss the point.

Each one shows how a second person can help and support someone else, compared with if they were alone. [pause]

Also, each example shows a basic need that a person would have if they were traveling back in that day. [pauseeee]

So scenario #1 is falling down. [pause]

It envisions two people walking along and some sort of fall happens.

Possibly they both fall, and one is fine and the other is injured, or maybe one of them falls into a pit and can't get out. [pause]

It's a situation where if a person were by themselves, it would be disastrous, but because they have a companion, the tragedy is averted. [pauseee]

⁴ This idea was brought out by: Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, ed. J. Alec Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 50.

This is reminding us that when you have a second person, an accident usually isn't as dire, as if you were alone. *[pauseeee]*

Do you see how big of a difference another person makes? *[pause]*

When I struggle, you can help me, and when you struggle, I can help you—this is the mutual help that we can give each other. *[pausee]*

We all have our moments of struggle and discouragement, and what we need is others to come to our aid.

But you know what? Other people also need *you*, for they have their own times of trial. *[pauseee]*

This is the give-and-recvie of relationships, and it's a wonderful thing. *[pauseee]*

1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, “We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak...” *[pause]*

There are idle, fainthearted, and weak people out there—maybe that's you right now—and they need us to admonish, encourage, and help them!

So will you be that “second person” they need? *[pauseeee]*

Through the support of others, we each can progress way farther than we could ever do alone! *[pauseeee]*

Scenario #2 is needing warmth. *[pause]*

This example pictures two people traveling somewhere and they have to sleep outdoors, but the temperature plummets at night. *[pausee]*

One person by themselves tries to stay warm, but it's really hard, and they very well could become weak or even die.

But if you have a second person, you can keep warm. *[pause]*

You lay together, and each person's body helps to keep the other person's body warm. *[pausee]*

In this scenario, it's not one person, who is healthy, helping another who is hurt.

Rather, two people are helping each other at the same time, as you work together. *[pauseee]*

This reminds me of Proverbs 27:17, “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another,” and Romans 14 calls us to pursue what makes for “mutual upbuilding.”⁵ *[pauseee]*

⁵ Romans 14:19.

As we work together, we can sharpen and build each other up.

And when we do this, the surrounding dangers of the world aren't as dangerous as they could be, for it's like we can "warm" each other up amidst the "coldness" of the world around us.

[pauseee]

When the temptations and pressures of the world seek to sap our strength, we can remind one another to be strong under trail.

We can mutually build each other up, helping one another resist the flood of lies that come at us.

[pauseeee]

Do you 'work together' with others, helping one another to live full of faith, strong in the Lord, and reliant upon Him? *[pauseeee]*

Scenario #3 is fending off an attacker. *[pause]*

Verse 12 says, "And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him." *[pause]*

So if a person is by himself, he could easily be overpowered by an attacker...

Maybe they are caught off guard, slightly weaker, or less skilled in fighting and it's over—they will be beaten. *[pause]*

But let's say that you were traveling with another person, now you can withstand an assault.

[pause]

Through the strength of the both of you, you can stand firm against the mugger.

And so also, when we help each other, we can assist each other in resisting Satan's schemes.

[pauseee]

To be alone in the spiritual battle, we can feel weak and unable, but when we come together as brothers and sisters-in-arms, then we are better off for it. *[pauseee]*

What a wonderful picture of people working together—two are *truly* better than one. *[pauseeee]*

This passage is teaching us that...

We were made to live in community with others, not alone.

You need others, Christian! *[pause]*

"A threefold cord is not quickly broken"!

The more strands that come together, the stronger it is—so the more people helping and supporting and encouraging one another makes us all stronger. *[pauseee]*

This is a prime reason why we need the church!

We need fellow believers to teach us, give us wisdom, encourage us, exhort us, build us up, and stir us on.⁶ *[pause]*

There ought to be no lone rangers, for we were made for community. *[pauseeee]*

Christ didn't save us to be mere individuals, but saved us to be a *people*. *[pause]*

1 Peter 2:10 says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people..." *[pause]*

We used to be those "having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus [we] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."⁷ *[pause]*

Through Christ's death and resurrection, He has made us one—Christ the Head, and we the body.

And this means that as members of His body, we need each other like body parts do, so let's care for one another.⁸ *[pauseeeee]*

Do you see the need for the church community? *[pause]*

Realize that God has brought us into a church family for our good, and when we intentionally live in relationship with one another, we can help each other live for the glory of God. *[pauseeee]*

Are you seeking to get connected *here*? *[pause]*

Remember that living for yourself doesn't satisfy and opens yourself up to preventable harm. *[pause]*

Remind yourself that "two are better than one," and that "a threefold cord is not quickly broken." *[pause]*

So don't just come and go.

Don't keep everyone at a distance, and try to live without others, rather, start building relationships. *[pauseee]*

This takes a desire to do so, and an intentionality to do so.

So use the "faith-in-action" nights to invite people over or go out for ice cream. *[pause]*

Join us at our fellowship lunches and make it a point to talk to people. *[pause]*

Call someone up and have a conversation—the list could go on. *[pauseeeee]*

⁶ See Colossians 3:16a, Proverbs 13:20a, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 3:13, & Hebrews 10:24.

⁷ Ephesians 2:12–13.

⁸ A reference to 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

Who can you encourage this week? *[pause]*

Who can you serve? *[pause]*

Who can you stir on to love and good works?⁹ *[pauseeee]*

As I reflect upon my own life, I've often wondered, "Where would I be without other believers?" and I shudder to think about it! *[pause]*

It's other believers who have helped me when I felt like I couldn't go on.

It's other believers who encouraged me when I was so discouraged that I felt like throwing in the towel.

It's other believers that pointed me to the marvelous, never-changing truth of God's Word, when my mind was encompassed by a fog of lies. *[pause]*

They have been living testimonies that "two are better than one," and some of you are the very people that I'm talking about. *[pause]*

You have helped me, encouraged me, served me, and I pray that I have done the same for you. *[pauseeee]*

Have you experienced the wondrous blessing of others in your life? *[pause]*

Have you been a blessing to other people? *[pauseeee]*

Let's work together in Christ, and show off what God can do when people are used by Him to bless, help, support, build up, and encourage others. *[pause]*

We were made to live in community with other people.

⁹ A reference to Hebrews 10:24.