

# **Two Better Than One**

**Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:7-12**

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof  
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

**May 15, 2011  
Morning Service**

---

People of God, and especially Cadets: I have a story to tell this morning. It's a true story. It's a story that I have quickly mentioned before—but that was on my first official Sunday preaching here. So some of these cadets were a lot younger then and won't remember that service. Probably most of you don't. That Sunday I brought four pictures of four things that could have killed me in the year before I began my ministry here. I'll just tell the one story.

It happened while hiking in Waterton National Park, in the Rocky Mountains. We were on the return portion of a full day's hike when we encountered the bear—and not just any bear—a grizzly bear. A huge grizzly bear. He was coming up the trail that we had to go down. As soon as we saw him, we stopped and started walking backwards. But the slow gait of the bear was closing the gap, despite our quickening backwards movement. I could hear the click-clack of his long paw nails on the hard trail. It was clear that we had to get out of his way. So off the trail we went and made a huge detour, in the bush to go around him. Thankfully, he did not follow and I am here to tell the tale.

But why tell this story? Because it illustrates the point of our text this morning. It was a good thing that I was not alone, when I was hiking. There were four of us that day. If the bear had become aggressive, we had numbers in our favour. In fact, bears never attack a group of hikers. They know they are outnumbered. But if I was hiking alone? Now, that would have been a different story. That's why the first rule in hiking in the Rockies is never hike alone.

Isn't that the point of this passage? Two is better than one. More is even better. Or in the words of verse 12b: "A cord of three strands is not

easily broken.” Now these words are the climax of a thought that began in verse 7.

Too often these words are taken in isolation. And so, it has been used to illustrate the value of Christian Schools. The home, church, and school are three strands that need to be bound together in unity, so that our children can receive a unified teaching about life in God’s world. It’s a good idea and in isolation this verse can help illustrate the idea. But it’s not the primary focus of this passage.

It’s a verse that had often been used as a wedding text. I preached on these verses in that light. The idea is that husband and wife need to be bound together with Christ. That way their marriage will be strong and will not fall apart. Again that is a very good point and I do think it gets closer to the intent of these verses. But marriage is not first and foremost in the mind of the teacher, (which is a good thing for these cadets, because it is way too early for them to even think about marriage).

What then is the primary intent of these verses? Simply put, two is better than one. More is even better.

In this book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher reflects upon life in the created order, especially when that life is lived apart from God or when sin distorts the created order. That’s why he often ends up sounding so pessimistic. When God enters the picture, his mood and outlook improves. In this section, he begins by reflecting upon the solidarity life. He considers “a man all alone.” Being single myself, I can identify with this man. Now there are certain advantages in being single. I can keep my room as messy as I’d like; why make the bed—when you’re going to undo it at the end of the day? I think the Cadets can appreciate that advantage. It’s because I’m single without a wife and kids to support that I was able to make the big trip to South America two years ago. My schedule can be flexible, so that in this past week I could attend a Conference in Toronto, without feeling guilty about leaving the family behind. Or when I returned I could make a few visits, finish the sermon, cut the lawn—all at my schedule. Being single has its advantages.

But it also comes with some disadvantages. It comes with certain sacrifices. Sure, I can travel more, but who do share the journey with? As I discovered in my South American journey, when no one really shared your Christian values and beliefs, you can feel isolated at times. And while I was refreshed at the Conference I just attended, it would have been nice on the last night, after the Conference was over, to have someone to share the evening meal with.

The Teacher, in the particular example before us, focuses on a man totally alone. He had no son or brother. No one was working with him. And remember in those days, the main form of work was agriculture. And even if it was some other form of business, it was always a family business—with the son always taking over the farm, or if the man was a carpenter, the brothers would also be in the business. But in this case, the man was all alone. He worked hard. He gained his wealth. But then after working so hard, for so long, he began to question what he was doing: Who am I working for? What's the use of toiling so hard if no family member can benefit and if I can't enjoy the fruit of my labour. Something was missing in this man's life. He had no one to share the work with; no one to share his success with.

And so the Teacher goes on to describe the benefits of two over one: Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. And then he takes this basic principle and illustrates in three ways. These three illustrations are taken from two people travelling together.

Now Cadets you have to realize that how they travelled in the days when these words were written is very different than how we travel today. No minivans to take you to your hockey game. Instead, most people had to walk. Neither did they have nicely paved roads; instead, they had paths that often had gullies and potholes in them. And since you had to walk, going any long distance required several days of walking. And since, they had no hotels nicely located along the way, travellers were often forced to sleep along the path.

And so the Teacher explains why two are better than one: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. As I said, these paths were not paved or smooth. It would be easy to take a tumble. And if you were carrying a large bundle, it might be difficult to get back up on your own. A travelling companion can help the person get back up.

And when you have to stop at night, it can get quite cold. In the Middle East, where this story is located, it's a desert environment. While it can get quite hot in the day, it can get quite cold at night. And since, sleeping bags weren't invented and didn't carry blankets, to keep warm at night, you huddled together to stay warm. By yourself, your body loses too much heat and you could die from hypothermia.

Of course, travelling in the ancient world could be dangerous. Robbers would try to steal your possessions. Remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? It's based on reality. One person probably cannot take on a robber, but with two you stand a fighting chance. And so the Teacher illustrates why two are better than one. Today, we might point to the buddy system, often used in school trips; or why you should not

hike by yourself in Grizzly country. Two are better than one. These are words of wisdom that apply in any age.

Then comes the climax in verse 12b: A cord of three strands is not easily broken. If two are better than one, then three is even better. Sometimes we say, “two’s company, three’s a crowd.” Yes, that can sometimes be the case, but more often more is better. There is strength in numbers.

These are wise words of wisdom. Two is better than one. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. But where is God in all of this? I want to be careful not to spiritualize this third cord. That often happens in a wedding, when the third cord is made to be Christ. It’s also what the information from the Cadets did when it said, “the third strong strand is Christ.” Well, it’s not as simple as that.

So where is God in all of this? In this passage, where the name of God is not mentioned, God is in the background. After all, these are reflections upon life in God’s created order and so God’s invisible presence is there. We don’t have to spiritualize the third cord, but recognize the wisdom of God in these words of wisdom.

What this passage underscores is the importance of community over the individual; as well as the sharing of a goal for the work to be done. When we see these things in a Christian context, the result is something that cannot easily be broken. Let me unpack these words.

We are created by God to be communal beings, not solitary individuals. The picture of the miserable wealthy man who was all alone evokes the words of God in Genesis 2:18, “it is not good for the man to be alone.” Adam needs companionship. As a result, Eve was created as that companion. Two is better than one. And so, indeed, these words do support and encourage marriage. But marriage is not the only way in which man finds companionship. Friendships and groups like the Cadets are very important. It’s good for these boys to come together to have fun together, to do activities together, to make friends together. Because community is more important and valuable than being alone. This passage, then, goes counter to the rugged individualism of our time.

But we should also note the concern for work in this passage as well. After all, the passage begins by stressing that it is meaningless to work for the benefit of no one else. Then in verse 9, we are reminded that work goes better with two than with just one. And it’s not just that more work can be done when two people are working. It’s that there is a shared goal that benefits other people.

This word of wisdom speaks, then, to the importance of Christian community and Christian friendship; of working together for the common cause of shaping life according to kingdom principles. Throughout the NT, a common metaphor for the church is the body. We're doing the work of the Lord together. Not as solitary individuals, but as people committed to a common cause. Rampant individualism is killing the church and undermining the work of the Lord.

These verses remind us to the importance of Christian friendship. Hopefully, if you're married your spouse can be that friend. A Christian friend can help so that when you fall down, because of some sin, your friend can help get back up, reminding you of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. And when you need the warmth of love, the love of Christian friend can go a long way in bringing healing to the soul. And when the temptations of the world try to attack you, a Christian friend can help you stand against them. And so, to our cadets, I want to encourage you to find good friend. Christian friends. Hopefully, you can find such friends in the cadet program. Friends who are willing to say: you shouldn't do that. Friends that will help you in your walk with God.

And a word to our Cadet Counsellors. You too have a continually role to play in the lives of these cadets. In this past year, you could have been that second or third person shaping the lives of these young boys. What a privilege and blessing that is. But just because Cadets may be done for year I want to encourage you to continue to play a role in the lives of these cadets. Hopefully, these cadets can always turn to you for words of advice and support.

Finally, we all need the reminder that we have in Jesus Christ, a great friend. As one song puts it, "what a friend we have in Jesus." And even if all our so-called friends betray us and forsake us, he never will. Yes, there are times when we can feel lonely. But with Jesus, we're never alone. He'll always be there to pick us up. He'll always be there to gives the warmth for our cold soul. He'll always protect us from our enemies. Two is better than one. And when that friendship with Jesus is shared within the Christian community, then our faith will be like a cord of three strands that will not be broken. Amen.