

Text: Nehemiah 9:38; 10:28-29

Title: “Life Together ... Encouraging”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – Yesterday was the ninth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on our nation, September 11, 2001. Later, as they removed the rubble of the destroyed World Trade Center, thousands of pieces of twisted, burned steel were taken to a foundry in Louisiana. There the steel was melted down and ultimately found its way into an amazing product. Six years later, the sleek, new, state-of-the-art ship named the *USS New York* sailed out of a ship yard in Louisiana. In her bow were nearly 8 tons of steel that had been collected from the ruins of the World Trade Center. Thousands of pieces of charred, scrap steel had been collected, melted down and poured into the mold of a ship whose mission is to defend the United States of America from future attacks. The ship's motto is: "Strength forged through sacrifice. Never forget."

That's what God has done in the forging of His church. He has taken the scraps of sin-ruined lives, redeemed and refined them through the fires of the Cross and forged them together into a vessel He will use in His Kingdom's work in this world.

Now we've been holding up the standard of God's Word for our life together. This was the standard *set* by the Lord Jesus Christ for His followers:

John 13:34-35 - A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

This was the standard *met* by the early church:

Acts 2:44 (NIV) - All the believers were together...

And just a couple of verses earlier this life together is described in greater detail.

Acts 2:42 (NIV) - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

That word “fellowship” is the word *koinonia* and it means sharing or partnering together. They really shared their lives together in a way that is amazing and unique.

Acts 2:46 - Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

In our church we share our life together in the largest gathering ... worship services. But we know that there are some things we can't accomplish by simply attending a worship service. So the next venue for spiritual formation in our life together is Sunday School ... smaller groups where we are able to break our congregation down into manageable units (departments and classes) so we can stay connected with each other and to study God's Word together in a systematic way. But there are

some things we can't accomplish in worship services and Sunday School on Sunday mornings, so we have the next venue for spiritual formation ... A2C groups. These groups are forming now and will begin meeting next Sunday evening.

There's something that happens at this level that many believers miss. I encourage you to find out from your life stage pastor or your Sunday School teacher how you can connect with an A2C group.

Now we also see this in the Old Testament life of the people of God. Turn once again to Nehemiah 9. Nehemiah has been leading the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem. But he knows that having nice buildings is not the most important thing for the people of God. Their spiritual lives as God's people needed rebuilding as well. So for nearly an entire month the Jewish people, the covenant people of God, gathered to worship and to open their hearts and lives to the Word of the Lord *and* Lord of the Word in prayer. At the climax of this they make themselves accountable to one another for some deep changes they will make. Now look at Nehemiah 9:38.

Nehemiah 9:38 (NIV) - "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."

I want you to see that there are some serious commitments made about life changes. And these commitments are not made in isolation. They are made with one another. They didn't go back to their homes and pray about it; they made an agreement together as the people of God. There was a sense of accountability to one another for being faithful to the Lord.

Just look at the wording of that verse again:

"In view of all this..." = Their lives were not what they should be. They had disobeyed the Lord. They confessed it, and now they were making some important decisions together.

"we" = this is not just individual revival; they were doing something together. They need each other in order to be able to fulfill what they are about to do.

"making a binding agreement" = the word "making" means "cutting." Sometimes when parties made agreements like this they would cut an animal or a bird in half, and walk between the two pieces as a symbol of their intention to keep the agreement.

"putting it in writing..." = this was not to be like our New Years' resolutions ... forgotten and broken by the middle of January. They put it in writing indicating the seriousness with which they are making these commitments.

Then the leaders make it official by "affixing their seals to it..." In Nehemiah 10:1-17 the names of these leaders are listed.

Nehemiah 10:1 (NIV) - Those who sealed it were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah. Zedekiah,

I'm not going to read all these names, but I suggest that if you are looking for a name for a baby boy in your home, you may want to look through this list and pick out a name for him. Perhaps a name like Shebaniah or Hacialiah might look good on the back of a football jersey!

Nehemiah 10:2-8 (NIV) - Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,³ Pashhur, Amariah, Malkijah,⁴ Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,⁵ Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,⁶ Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,⁷ Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,⁸ Maaziah, Bilgai and Shemaiah. These were the priests.

Let me show why this kind of deep life together is important for the people of God. I want to give you a vision of what can happen in your life ... how our church can be enriched.

1. TRUTH IS TOLD

Remember the prayer they prayed in Nehemiah 9.

Nehemiah 9:2b (NIV) - They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.

That word “confess” means to say what is true. You know, in the church we’re so determined to make everyone believe that we’re perfect. And yet we know that not one of us is. We can’t grow until we’re honest with each other.

ILLUSTRATION – Steven Curtis Chapman recorded a song a few years ago entitled “We’re All Broken.” The song says, “I’m just a well dressed wreck, I’m just a made up mess, working hard trying to keep everybody impressed. All the while I’m falling apart on the inside.”

And to tell truth to each other there needs to be trust. There are some things that are appropriate to say to a small group of trusted friends, like an A2C group. But then there are some things that are only appropriate to share with one trusted soul.

Growth happens when truth is told. But also...

2. ACCOUNTABILITY IS GIVEN

We see this in what happens here in Nehemiah 9-10.

Nehemiah 10:28 (NIV) - “The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—

Nehemiah 10:29 (NIV) - all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

The changes they are making can't and shouldn't be made alone. They make these commitments to God and to one another. We cannot experience the deep changes and transformation without the encouragement of a community of other believers.

So the people signed on to the commitment made by the leaders.

Nehemiah 10:29 (NIV) - All these now join their brothers the nobles...

The word "join" there is a powerful and intense word. It means to strengthen oneself. It's the picture of my using my strength to strengthen others, and others strengthening me.

Nehemiah 10:29 (NIV) - all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses

"bind themselves" = pictures people moving together toward a destination. They are like cars of a train that are linked together moving down a railroad track in the same direction.

ILLUSTRATION – John Wesley was the founder of the movement known as Methodism. When Wesley was a student at Oxford University in the 1730s he formed a discipleship group ... a spiritual accountability group. Some of the other students at Oxford mockingly called it the "Holy Club." Part of their life together was that they asked one another certain accountability questions. Here are a few of them:

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am?
- Can I be trusted?
- Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
- Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
- Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?
- Am I enjoying prayer?
- When did I last speak to someone else of my faith?
- Do I pray about the money I spend?
- Do I disobey God in anything?
- Am I defeated in any part of my life?
- Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
- Am I proud?
- Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard?
If so, what am I doing about it?
- Do I grumble or complain constantly?
- Is Christ real to me?

Many people fail at the changes they want to see happen in their lives because they are trying to do it alone.

Now I want to stretch this out a little more so that you can see from a New Testament perspective what happens when we are able to enter into this kind of connection with each other.

3. BURDENS ARE SHARED

Galatians 6:2 - Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

People who aren't part of this life together end up bearing their burdens alone.

ILLUSTRATION – Many people today are looking for this community online. And as popular networks like Facebook or Twitter are, I'm not sure that they can provide us with the kind of life together that is life changing.

Recently I read the devastating story of Abraham Biggs. This 19-year-old college student had no relationships. His "family" was an online chat room. Abraham Biggs posted at least 2,300 messages, many of them chronicling his personal struggles, even his desire to commit suicide. One day Biggs posted one final note, swallowed a bunch of pills, and invited his on-line community to watch his death on a live video website.

What is so deplorable is what investigators discovered after the suicide. Many in Biggs' on-line "family" had actually encouraged him to take his life. When officers finally found where Biggs was located, 181 people were watching the video, many of them typed "LOL" ("laugh out loud") on the screen.

I hope you're part of a group of people who genuinely care about you and help you bear your burdens.

ILLUSTRATION – A couple of Sundays ago one of ladies here at Travis came up to me after a service. I asked how she was doing. She had just recently lost her father in death; it was a tough time for her. She said something like, "Pastor, I tell you, this church thing works. I can't tell you how many of my church friends called me and encouraged me through this ordeal. I couldn't have made it through without my church.

In this kind of community our joys are doubled and our sorrows are halved. Burdens are shared. The next thing that happens:

4. WISDOM IS GAINED

Proverbs 11:14 - Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 24:6 - for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.

And God has deposited wisdom in His church ... wisdom that we share and benefit from. We all have blind sides, and we don't always see things clearly. Others can help us.

ILLUSTRATION – Typically on a football team, if a quarterback is right-handed, his blind side is his left side because he's turned facing the right to throw. So the left side of the offensive line is crucial to cover the quarterback's blind side.

There's something else that happens at this level of life together:

5. NEEDS ARE MET

We see this on the pages of the Book of Acts. Those early believers were close enough to each other to know when there were needs.

Acts 2:44-5 (NIV) - All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

6. SIN IS DEFEATED

1 John 1:7 - But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

As we walk in the light with each other, the grip of sin is broken over our lives.

IMPORTANCE OF FELLOWSHIP - Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the hazards of independence and isolation in his book *Life Together*: "The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation."

There's one more thing you need to see about this life together.

7. FAITHFULNESS IS ENCOURAGED

Hebrews 10:24 - And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:25 - Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION - A few years ago there was a television mini-series called "Spartacus." The mini-series follows the adventures of a former slave who leads an army of freed slaves against the Roman army. In one scene, Spartacus and his followers are hiding out in a forest because the Roman army is looking for them. Spartacus takes this time to rally his troops to prepare them for decisive action. But his followers are unsure and even selfish.

One man, Crixus, says, "I go where I go. No man tells Crixus what to do anymore." Spartacus calls for Crixus to come and stand next to him. Spartacus says, "This is Crixus the Gaul—maybe the strongest man among us. Still, he's only one man."

Spartacus hands Crixus a single arrow, saying, "Can you bend this?" Crixus takes it and easily breaks it and throws it to the ground.

Then Spartacus hands Crixus a stack of arrows that are bound together, saying, "Now all of these." Crixus takes the arrows and is unable to break them, throwing them to the ground in frustration.

"We are like the arrows," Spartacus says. "Separately we're weak, but together we're invincible."

What a powerful picture of the Church! Individually we can't be strong. Together, we are invincible.