

I Just Feel Like I Am in This Alone

Philippians 1:30, Galatians 6:2, Hebrews 10:24-25

Good morning, men. I think I might have gotten myself into trouble this week. My wife's birthday is coming up. We have this little hose that comes out to spray on our sink. The fitting that holds it in place broke a few months ago, and my wife's been asking me about it. I took a picture of it. I asked my wife what she wanted for her birthday. She said she would be completely happy if I would just fix the hose on the sink. Young men, if you are not married, try to fall in love with a woman who loves Home Depot.

We're in this series, "Man Alive." We had an introductory session last time. This week we are going to get into the first of the primal needs.

I met Bill a few days after his wife served him with divorce papers. He was very sad. He said, "All I ever did was work, work, work. I neglected my wife and kids. I have no friends, and basically, I completely isolated myself from everybody and now I'm paying for it." This issue or problem of isolation is one of the most common problems for us as men. Ever since we were young men, we've been told by all of our caregivers, parents, teachers, grandparents, coaches, pastors that we need to take responsibility for ourselves and we do. It's our mission to lead, protect and provide, but there is also this huge tendency in the process to end up becoming isolated.

By isolated, I don't mean we are hermits. We all have men we talk to during the day and most of us have a friend or two that we would call pretty good friends, but I'm talking about a type of vulnerability – that men really know *who you are*. I've said it here many times. You can sit at your tables here and if you want to, you can remain invulnerable; you cannot open yourself up to the other guys; you can't tell them what is really going on in your life. You can hide out even here at a Bible study with a group of guys. I know this is true because some of you have done it over the years. We worked through that and God has done a good work in your life.

The problem here that I want us to talk about is that you were never meant to go it alone. You were never meant to go it alone. One of a man's deeply felt needs is to feel like he doesn't have to do life alone – [that] He doesn't have to tackle the problems of life without somebody who really cares.

I have men who—in one way or another—tell me all the time that they just feel like they are in this thing all alone. The title of our talk today is, "I Feel Like I Am in This Alone." It's not true. God has wired us not for isolation, but God has wired us for authentic relationships.

Let's turn to the scriptures and I want to prove that to you biblically. I want to spend most of the time today talking about how you can actually apply this in your life. Hebrews 10:24. There are a couple of other verses you will notice at the top of your outline. You can look those up later, too. Philippians 1:30 in the NLT says we are in this struggle alone... No, Paul doesn't say that. He says we are in this struggle *together*. We are in this struggle together, and it is a struggle. Galatians 6:2 says that we should share each other's burdens. Share each other's burdens. Hebrews 10:24 says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting with each other as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as we see the day

approaching.” God wired us for authentic relations. It’s the devil who keeps whispering, “That’s not a good idea to share that about yourself. That’s not a good idea to open yourself up and to be vulnerable.”

I want to give you a little further proof, too. We are going to make this the big idea. We are going to make this a little more deductive. We usually do inductive, but we’ll do a little more deductive this time. This is the big idea for the day: **Jesus changed the world by inviting 12 men to be part of a small group.**

The reason I want to make this the big idea today is just think about the implications of this – that Jesus—and I only had this thought this morning, but I was pleasantly surprised this morning when it occurred to me the elegance and the simplicity of how Jesus combined the solution to the problem of isolation and His strategy to change the world into one idea – putting men in small groups.

So this is Jesus’ strategy for changing the world – inviting men to be part of a small group, and simultaneously, it is His solution for the problem of isolation. Simple, powerful, effective, pure genius. Jesus is a genius. This is His strategy to invest in men who will invest in other men. But Jesus didn’t just invite men to be a part of a small group for what they could do for Him. He invited them to be a part of a small group for what He could do for them.

I wanted to talk about what happened—probably what happened—in that small group, and what could happen in the small group you might be a part of.

THE POWER OF SHARED STORIES

The first thing I want to talk about is the power of shared stories; on the other side of isolation is a powerful force for change – your story.

We have a first-timers’ table; you know that because you were here at some point for the first time and you went to the first-timers’ table. Although some of you have been here for 25 years, you probably don’t remember what we talk about there. Let me refresh your memory. When we have a first-timer come, I know the power of shared stories, so at the end of the first session I always ask the men where they are on their spiritual journey, and then we give the men an opportunity to share about their stories.

Since 1986, guess how many men I can remember who did not want to answer that question? We’ve had on average about four visitors a week, sometimes fewer or more, but on average about four visitors a week for 25 years. I’ve calculated that we’ve had about 5000 visitors. But guess – out of those estimated 5000 men, how many did not want to share where they were on their spiritual journey? Zero. I have no recollection of any man ever coming to the Bible study and not wanting to answer the question or share where he is on his spiritual journey. Why is that? Number one is that we work very hard to make this a safe environment where men can open up a little bit and share and so they feel safe in answering that question because they realize we have no agenda here except a spiritual agenda. That is the first reason

The second reason is that I know they have just heard a message from the Word of God where we take a few verses, try to explain them, and talk about how we can apply them to our lives. So I know these men have probably or possibly heard from God through the Word of God even if they are not aware of it, and that God is working in their

hearts at that moment – and the Word of God is like a jack hammer on a hard heart. It will definitely soften you up if you are pliable, but if it's not, it will break up, too; we have a lot of guys break up. That's okay.

What is the result of that when they do share these stories? They don't feel quite so alone anymore. They feel valued as a person. They feel respected. They begin to feel the first inklings of the transforming power of the gospel. Probably most of them wouldn't be able to say it exactly like that, but [it's] the first inklings of the transforming power of the gospel in the context of a caring community.

The big idea again today is this: **Jesus changed the world by inviting 12 men to join a small group.** The first change that takes place is when we share our stories with each other.

THE POWER OF A CARING COMMUNITY

Secondly, there is power in a caring community. I realize I've never done this before. I've never written a book and taught it. I've always taught a book and then written it, but in this case I have taught a book, written it and now I'm teaching it but in different forms. So the point is some of the stories I will tell you I have no doubt told before and so I'm counting on you having a poor memory or a lot of grace, or maybe both. But David and Ruthie Delk go to a church where four of the couples in this church, they're marriages—all within the course of a year—started to fail because of a combination of adultery, pornography, prostitutes, and strip clubs. As it turned out, two of the couples did end up getting divorced—lengthy court and custody battles over teenagers, very messy—but the other two couples' marriages were restored.

What was the difference? In the two couples that got divorced, the men that were caught up in this sexual misconduct were on the fringe of the church and not connected in relationships. But the two men who were restored were in small groups. They were not being honest and vulnerable, just like I was talking about at the beginning; you can be here and not be open about what is going on in your life. You can hide out and that's what they were doing, but they were in small group. When those two small groups found out what was going on, they moved in on these guys and began to care for them and love them. In one case, the guy said—a guy caught up in pornography said—"I can't take it anymore; I'm baling out on my marriage. I'm done." You know what his small group said? They said, "No, you are not — you are not going anywhere." Then they proceeded to begin ministering to him. For example, a couple of days later they showed up at his house and seized his computer, cleaned off all the porn, and installed filtering software and figured out how to monitor that. Imagine how happy those two wives are today that their husbands were connected in authentic relationships with a few other guys. The second application here today is there is power in being part of a caring community.

Do you have some guys that you can call at 2 a.m. if you are really in trouble? Who would really take it seriously – who you've called and you invested in men and have some men invested in you where you have those authentic relationships? What is your litmus test for a real friend?

I told you about the FBI agent who called me one day to get a reference on one of our members who wanted to go to work for homeland security. I said, "Sure, fire away." He said no, he had to do this in person. I *had* to do this in person, he insisted. I couldn't get him to do it over the phone. We were sitting across the desk from each other and he looked really tense. He's asking these questions [and] he is so tense it's noticeable. Finally, he said, "Have you ever been in his home?" And I said, "Yeah, sure," and you could see him relax. It was so noticeable—the change so

abrupt—that I commented on it. Here’s what he said: “I have interviewed lots of people who said they were close personal friends of another person, but what I usually discover is that they barely know the most basic facts about that person. They frequently don’t even know how many children their close personal friend has. Sometimes they don’t even know their close personal friend even *has* children and almost never do they know the names of their children. But what I have discovered is that when men really are friends with each other, that generally speaking, they’ve been in each other’s homes. So I use that as the litmus test.” What is your litmus test?

Being honest in a sharing, caring community, I’ve got a little confession. I actually use you a lot of the time to be part of my caring community. I’ll make little confessions to you just to get it out in the open so I have this visibility. Visibility is accountability. Here’s one for you. I’ve got this little red sports car and it has a windshield that is pitted – it’s an older car. It’s pitted from sand. It’s German glass and it’s a little on the soft side so it’s pitted. When I’m driving in the sun I can barely see out of it. It’s a safety hazard. I keep trying to ratch it up, because you know with your insurance company under state law here in Florida, they are required to replace your windshield for free. So I really want a new windshield because this thing is terrible. But I haven’t had a rock fly through. I drive behind these big trucks hoping that a rock will hit it.

I even called my agent and I said, look, here’s the situation. He said, “Since you bought the car and it had a pitted windshield when you bought it, that would be a pre-existing condition so you don’t qualify for the free windshield.” I wish I hadn’t called him. Now that I know that, it’s sort of an accountability measure, too. But the point is that this week, I had my wife’s windshield replaced because it did get a rock chip. She was the lucky one. She got a rock chip in hers and got her windshield replaced. All week long I had this internal moral conundrum battle—it is a battle, we are in this struggle together—to just go ahead and tell the guy to do my car, too.

Isn’t that amazing? I’ve been walking with the Lord for 40 years now. But you know what they call doing that – getting that windshield replaced? Insurance fraud. That’s what they call that. I don’t know about you but I have too many things that I’m hoping God will do in, with, for, through, and by me that I can’t afford to risk, so I’m coming out on that, you see. I’m coming out on that. Frankly, I don’t think I’m a risk to do it, but I’m coming out any way so that...now I can’t do it because I told everybody. I know what’s going to happen now – for the next 12 months, about every three weeks, someone will say, “Is that a new windshield on that car?”

There is power in being part of a caring community. Jesus knew that. This is the second little application. **Jesus changed the world by inviting 12 men to join a small group.** Think about the implications of this. Jesus changed the world by inviting 12 men to be part of a small group and that was His strategy.

Do you see how important it was to Jesus for us to be part of a small group? Do you see that? Is being part of a small group the gospel? No. Is being part of a small group the way Jesus helps *deliver* the gospel? You bet! Can you have the gospel without being part of a small group? You bet! Will you be better in the gospel if you are part of a small group? You bet.

IT STARTS WITH THE HEART

Finally, it does start with the heart. This whole not feeling like you are in this thing alone, part of it is sharing your story, part of it is being part of a caring community and what happens in that caring community. What you want to

be doing when you present yourself in a small group is you want your heart to be transformed. That's what it's about.

My younger brother Pete called me and told me that his favorite day was Tuesday because that's when the new movie rentals come out. He said, "My life got so boring and I was so filled with self-loathing that I was organizing my life around my favorite TV programs, and the new movie rental releases that come out on Tuesdays." The reason that came up is because I said, "Pete, there is something different about you. What is going on?" My brother Pete became a Christian 10 or 12 years ago. But recently I'd noticed a transformation—a metamorphosis—taking place in my brother so I asked him about that. That is when he told me about Tuesdays, and he said that what is different is that a couple or three years ago, he got involved in a men's small group Bible study. These men opened themselves up to him and accepted him as-is, and so his life really started changing when he started opening up to these guys and they didn't reject him. He thought they wouldn't like him if they really knew who he was, but instead they loved him and accepted him just like he was. And so here it is – transformation of the heart; it takes place by simply presenting yourself as a flawed vessel and then looking intently into God's Word in the company of a few other men who care about each other. You don't really have to do anything. It's the Holy Spirit who does the work. It's the Holy Spirit who does the work.

Let me ask you what you think about this. Can you think of a single man that you know who has ever gotten transformation right on a consistent basis without looking into the Word of God in the company of a few other people who care about each other? I've racked my brain and I can't think of anybody. I can't think of a single person that I know who is consistently getting transformation right unless he is looking intently at the Word of God in the company of other men who really care about each other under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus put so much emphasis on small groups. He changed the world by inviting 12 men to be a part of a small group.

Last week, last session, I said the big idea was: Digging into the Word of God is the number one factor that differentiates men who've tapped into God's power. This week, let me also say that a second important factor is being in a small group with a few other guys. That was Jesus' strategy. It's happened over and over again where I was in—I could pick *any* city I've been in but I remember clearly one day being in Nashville and a man walking toward me... you could just tell he felt like he was in this all alone. You can tell when a guy feels like he is all alone. He was telling me his story about his marriage being in trouble, his business being in trouble, and so forth. When he was done, I asked him the same two questions I ask every man: "Tell me about your Bible reading habits." His shoulders slumped and he said, "Well, to be honest, I haven't really read the Bible very much lately." I said, "Okay, I understand. Second question: who is your best friend, or do you have a small group of guys you get together with on a regular basis?" Again, same thing – shoulders slumped. He said, "No. To be honest, I was in a Bible study once but I haven't been in one now for a long time."

These two first factors that I am sharing with you... From my perspective as a person in the business of working with men, if I could only suggest two things to a man, [they would be] that he would dig into the Word of God for himself, and secondly that he would also do that with a few other guys. Big idea? Remember Jesus changed the world by inviting 12 men to join a small group. That has to be important.

CLOSING PRAYER

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you have given us this primal need to feel like we are not alone – that you have wired us for authentic relationships. Help us, when we hear the devil whispering that it is not a good idea, to reject that and make ourselves vulnerable so that we might become men alive. We ask this in your name, Jesus.