

CIRCLE UP!

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN PIERCE & RYAN LUI. 2013 OCTOBER 06.



JAMES 1:22-25

KEN PIERCE (VIDEO):

When I was newly married and had made the plunge into being fully grown-up, I thought, “Now I’ve got to learn how to barbeque!”

I used probably the whole can of lighter fluid because it kept going out.

I cooked my hamburgers, brought them inside – and they pretty much tasted like lighter fluid.

Later on, I saw on the bag that it said, “Put the charcoal briquettes into pyramids.”

“Oh! That’s how it’s supposed to work!”

There’s something about these little briquettes that when you stack them into pyramids, they glow together. They’re not meant to be alone; they have to be *together* to create the energy and the heat that’s necessary to make the barbeque work.

Isn’t that true of us, as Christians, also? Isn’t that how God has designed us, not to be isolated but to be together? When we come together in circles and in small groups, God’s transforming power works through us *together* and we light up and become his people – *that’s* how God designed us to be!

KEN PIERCE (LIVE):

A lot of art going on back there in that video!

Around here we often talk about going deeper in our relationship with God. Those of us who are on the journey towards Jesus, we talk about moving closer to Jesus. We even have this title here: *God in My Everything*. Going deeper and journeying towards and moving closer to God and to Jesus is what this series is about.

Part of that growing deeper is spending time alone. I like spending time alone – I really do. I enjoy sitting in my La-Z-Boy at home, just relaxing. I pull out my tablet and look at the Scriptures and, to be honest, I really do think deep thoughts. I really do. I know you may not believe me, but I really do!

I look at the Scriptures, and sometimes I’ll pull out my journal and I’ll journal incredible things! I’ve even been known— Don’t laugh! Okay, you can laugh. I’m even known to have written poetry in my journal before – very little, but I have written some poetry in there. Sometimes I get really serious about my journal and think that, once I pass on, my wife is going to take my journal and publish them into my memoirs and print them for everyone to read these great, deep thoughts of mine. I really do actually think that sometimes. I think I’m just a little bit too full of myself sometimes!

What we’re doing right here, gathering together – this is important, too, and necessary. I, too, am like you: I come and join with you, and we sing songs and we get information and we get inspired and we corporately worship God together – and that’s part of it, too.

But when I spend time in community, with people who are like me a bit, who give me energy, who excite me –

and then with people who *annoy* me, it's amazing how quickly I'm nowhere near the mature person I thought I was, just sitting here this morning. It's amazing how there's so much that happens here on Sunday, and I feel like, "Yes!" Yet when I get around other people, face-to-face, and begin doing life, I realize that I've thought a little bit too highly of myself.

I want to tell you that when you take this time alone, and then you take this time together in Scripture, and then you add that circle or that pyramid, as with the charcoal briquettes— When you get people in circles, *then* the transformation process – the beginning-to-be-like-Jesus and the growing-deeper, for those of us who have decided to follow him – becomes complete.

This is where we're going this evening. I want to share with you what tonnes of other people and I have experienced – and that is that Life Together, in circles, is better. It's how we're designed.

Let me pray as we kind of launch into this this evening.

Lord,

Everyone here is in a different place. Some people here are curious about you. Some people have decided to follow you yet still cannot find a circle that quite fits them. Some of us are in circles and it's going great.

Everyone here is in a different place, and so I will trust, Father, that you will take these words and, no matter where people are, use them for your honour and for your glory and for them to understand more and for them to grow closer to you.

I lift this up in your name.

Amen.

Several weeks ago, I preached a sermon, and in that sermon, if you were here, you may remember I said that there was a period in my life where I stepped out of full-time Christian ministry. During that season, I worked at a gym, a fitness club.

Every year, in the fitness business, in January, a lot of people join the fitness club: They'll start with a New Year's resolution or maybe someone gifted them a membership to a gym for Christmas. Either way, they come with good intentions – and their good intentions really get them hardly anywhere at all! In fact, clubs can sell three times the memberships they can actually handle in the physical building because the people who join don't actually show up all the time. It's hard to believe, but it's true.

My sister has been a personal trainer for over 25 years, and she will tell you this without hesitation: The people who get into shape and meet their fitness goals do it one hundred times better if they do it in community, even if it's just one-on-one with a trainer.

There's something about a community and being in community and with other people that encourages people. *Even in a gym*, Life Together is better! It's how we're designed.

Still, many of us are content to come here to church and kind of navigate through the service and then go home – and that's that!

I grew up with mandatory church attendance. You don't need to raise your hands here, but I bet some of you had mandatory church attendance when you were growing up as well. As I was growing up, I rarely thought, "Oh, I can't wait to get home or get with my friends and talk about what the preacher said!" I mean, that just never occurred to me; I never thought about that.

James, the brother of Jesus, in the book of the Bible called James, writes about people who come to church and hear a good sermon – and then they just go home and forget about it.

Turn with me, if you will: We're going to look at this in James 1.

(If you're new to the Bible, it's kind of near the end of the Bible. It's also going to be on the screen. And if you want an actual paper copy, there's a book in the pew-rack in front of you: It's called the Bible and it's right there in front of you!)

We're going to start with verse 22. In James 1:22, he says, "[Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.](#)"[‡] I want to stop right there.

How did he possibly know that we would be doing this? This was written several thousand years ago. Well, back then, things weren't that much different than they are today. People would come to the temple and listen to Scriptures taught, and they would think, "I've made progress." It is like the people who join my sister's gym: By joining the gym, by attending occasionally, by sliding their card at the scanner, they think they've made progress. Or maybe coming to church, you actually found a parking spot – well, that *is* progress! And maybe you navigated the songs, and these songs are new to you. Or this whole idea of coming together like this and singing like this and having more than one drum on the stage – maybe this is a little bit new to you, right? You've navigated that; maybe there's even a tinge of emotion, and you think, "I *must* be making progress."

Not to make light of what you feel, but James would say, "You're not fooling anyone except maybe yourselves." He writes, "[Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.](#)" Then he adds this last part: "[Do what it says](#)" (James 1:22). "[Do what it says.](#)"

Again, when I read that, I think of my sister. Remember, I said that she is a personal trainer. My sister told me, "The people who sign up to be trained by me don't sign up because I'm going to be nice to them." Now, my sister is a fairly nice person, although she was mean to me my whole life, okay? And she's going to listen to this, so I'm going to get a call and she's going to probably thump me for saying this, right? She picked on me my whole life, but she really is a nice person. But she's got kind of that drill-sergeant mentality when it comes to training, and people don't pick her because she's going to be easy on them. In fact, she says, "I will make them do the work." She's kind of like Jesus' brother James. She says, "Do it!" That is what James is saying: "[Do what it says.](#)"

And then— It's kind of embarrassing to me when I think about it, but then he offers this incredible word- picture to unpack that because, for some reason, some people don't quite understand the phrase "[Do what it says.](#)" So he says, "Okay, if you don't get that, I'll explain it a little bit more."

Look at verse 23: "[Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like](#)" (James 1:23-24).

You see, you wouldn't get up in the morning and stand in front of the mirror in your bathroom or wherever you get ready and go, "Oh, I look terrible!" and then just do nothing about it. I mean, I know you! You would stand there until it got fixed. You would keep working at it. You wouldn't dare go to work or go to school or go out for the day without fixing what you just saw in the mirror.

James is saying, "You come to church and you become aware" – in other words, you look in the mirror – "that change needs to take place; that you need to do something about that habit; that you need to speak to someone;

[‡] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®.

that you need to change the path down which you're going; that you need to turn off that computer; that there's someone that possibly you need to forgive."

He is saying that to come here and to clearly see that something needs to happen and then do nothing about it – well, that's just foolish! It's something we'd never do in real life after looking at a mirror. We would *do* something.

He goes on. James 1:25: "[But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom...](#)" I want to stop for a second and consider what he just said.

Ask yourself this: When you think of the law, is the very next word that comes to mind "freedom"? "[But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom...](#)," he says. When you think of God's law, is freedom really the first thing that comes to your mind?

I know when I was young and I was just learning to follow Jesus, I thought just the opposite: "Are you kidding? It's a bunch of rules! Where's the freedom in that?" You see, to me there was no freedom in being a Christian.

Pastor and author Andy Stanley says that he used to think the Bible had way too many words in it and that it could have been put into just a 3" x 5" card that reads, "No!" As in, "I said, No!" "What does God say about that?" "No!" "Well, God, is it okay if I...?" "No!" Where's the freedom there?!

Yet, as I've grown and learned more about God and the Bible, I've seen that the principles not only make sense but also actually give me freedom. They give me freedom in things like my relationships with other people. They give me freedom in things like my finances.

Just a quick example: Proverbs 11:15 – this is the *Message* paraphrase, and it says, "[Whoever makes deals with strangers is sure to get burned; if you keep a cool head, you'll avoid rash bargains.](#)" Now, I know this sounds like a very common-sense piece of advice, but it's the kind of common-sense that, if the United States banks would have listened to fifteen or twenty years ago, we and they wouldn't be in the situation they're in. But their greed pushed them to loan money to just about anyone: They didn't pay attention to with whom it was they made bargains – and their greed caught up with them.

You see, God's ways actually do bring freedom, even in simple pieces of advice like that. But James says we have to commit to applying those things to our lives; we have to *do* it in order for those things to bring us freedom. We're only free when we do what it says. Last week, Pastor Ken Shigematsu quoted Elton Trueblood, who said that the "paradox of freedom" is "that we are most free when we are bound." As one of your pastors, I really want you to be free. I really do.

So, when we *together* come and look at this passage, we go on and see what else James says: "[But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed](#)" (James 1:25). There's going to be freedom.

When we think about the vision and the goals of this church, we ask, "How is it that we can move people along so that when they come here on Sunday and hear the Word and there's something to happen with that; there's a challenge; they've looked in the mirror— How is it that we can help them do what it says?" And we keep coming back to thinking that circles are the best way to do that.

Now, I know that a circle, a small group, is not for everyone, but we think it is for most. We think that "circles are better than pews," and so that's kind of our slogan in the small group ministry: "Circles are better than pews." We think that Life Together is, indeed, better. Right here on my shirt it says, "Life Together is better."

In the small group that I was in, during the first two years of living here, Life Together was crucial for us. We

needed each other. (There's a picture of my group coming up any second now. There it is.)

When one couple in our group nervously but excitedly announced their pregnancy, we all celebrated together. And then when that same couple announced that they had miscarried – well, as you can imagine, we cried a lot together.

When one person in our group found the one whom she was going to marry, we celebrated. In fact, I was “forced” to go to Hawaii and officiate their wedding just recently; it was a great time.

I still get just a little bit overwhelmed when I think of the day that our small group presented to me and my wife, Aisyah, a cheque for \$2,000 so that we could apply for permanent residency here in Canada. I mean, who does that? No one's ever done anything like that for me. That type of generosity is incredible. It was their way of saying, “We want you stay around. We want to do Life Together with you. We'll put our money where our mouth is.”

When one woman brought her friend who was curious about Jesus and Christianity to join us, we embraced her. She's very close to us to this day and has become part of our doing Life Together.

One of our members works in the movie industry, and he's made a lot of big-budget, big-time films. For one of them that he made, we all went together, and after the movie was over, we stayed around and watched the credits. I don't know – anybody ever watch the credits? You don't have to raise your hand; I don't. Oh, my goodness! But we stayed around and watched the credits until we saw his name come up. Like proud parents, we – all five of us – stood up and clapped for him. No one else was there because it was near the end of the movie, but we stayed around watching for his name. We were together!

We watched the Stanley Cup be lost by the Canucks – and that's all I'm going to say about that!

We regularly talked of Scripture and what it meant for our lives, and then we prayed together and for each other. We're all part of each other's lives even today, even though that group is no longer together. We grew deeper in our relationship with God because we were together. We did Life Together – and I'm a better person because of it.

Next week, Ken is going to talk about spiritual friendships, and those key friendships are an important part of Life Together and an important part of being in circles as well.

For now, Ryan Lui, who works with me in the small group and adult ministries area, is going to come and share. Perhaps for some of you, getting something from small group is not really scratching where you itch, and so Ryan is going to talk about a different approach toward being part of a small group.

RYAN LUI:

Thank you, Ken. Matching t-shirts. You guys can get one if you ask *very nicely* later on!

Being Chinese and being a former business student, I grew up being told to always get the most bang for my buck; to get the highest return from my investment; to give as little as possible and to get as much as possible back. Why buy a fish-filet meal when you can get two McDoubles and two Junior Chickens, right? [*People in the congregation variously concur.*] We know where the students are in the room! \$1.39, just in case you don't know – it's a very good deal!

Growing up as an only child and having been born in the “me-me-me” generation (I'm sure you guys can relate), I was told a lot that giving is better than getting – that giving is, in fact, the best gift that you can get. Yeah, nice try, mom! But somehow— Well, not “somehow,” but as a Christian, by the power of the Holy Spirit, I've been coming to understand this truth – this reality – that giving is far greater than just getting; that, when you give yourself to

another, you always get so much more back than you gave.

I want to tell a short story about how I've been learning that this year.

About a year ago, sometime in mid-spring, I took the Alpha course and met a girl in my small group who grew up an atheist but, by revelation of the Holy Spirit and through the Alpha course, became a Christian. That was an awesome time.

As we were approaching the end of the Alpha course, I felt a push or a pull to invite her into my small group. You see, Ken has mentioned that we have a slogan that says "circles are better than pews," and I do really believe that. I really didn't want to see her end up just coming to church once in a while – or even every week, just coming. I wanted her to experience the fullness of life that I think only comes when you have community or spiritual friendships as part of that rhythm of life. So I did the only thing that I knew how to do and that was to invite her into our small group, and eventually she said yes. Actually, not eventually; she simply said, "Yes."

Through the summer of 2012, we had hotpot together, we prayed together, we studied the Bible together, we played lots of Taboo together – and after getting to know her, I noticed something that was different about her, something special. So in late August or early September of 2012, I asked her if she would take the Foundations of Leadership course here at Tenth Church. After some pushback and some wrestling, she finally agreed.

Where is she now? Well, my friend Charlotte has replaced me as the leader of our small group. She works for LiveWire. She brought her sister to the Alpha course. And she's currently interning at our Kitsilano location with Pastor Dan Matheson and the Kits ministry team. In terms of climbing any Christian ladder that we might have, she's kind of running circles around most of us, isn't she?

Through the last year, Charlotte and I would get together maybe every month or so and talk. We would talk about God; we would talk about the Bible, the church – just a lot of topics that, as a new Christian, she would obviously have. We would sometimes spend three hours at Forty Ninth Parallel, this coffee shop on Main with lots of bricks and nice light bulbs, like the ones outside in the Upper East Hall. We'd sit on the patio during the summer and drink iced coffees and just talk. It was a great time.

Sometimes, she'd call me and ask me questions about small group – even argue with me sometimes, and that was okay; I didn't mind that. Because she had to come to Tenth for Foundations and because I work here, she would, once in a while, knock on my door and say, "Hey, Ryan, do you have a few moments to talk?" I'd be like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure. Sit down. Yeah, I've got a few moments." Then an hour would go by and we'd finish up, and she'd say, "Oh, sorry for taking up so much of your time." I'd be like, "No, no, no. It's fine. It's my pleasure."

Well, why? Because I think only through her have I begun to understand what it truly means to have giving be the greatest gift that you can get.

I think that's why in 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, Paul says this to the church: "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? [Yeah], you are our glory and joy."

Paul, as we know, was a big deal back then. He was a Pharisee who trained under the greatest of Pharisees. He was a Roman citizen. But in this passage, we see that Paul is saying that when he stands before Jesus one day, he's not going to point out his accomplishments or status; he's going to point to the people to whom he gave himself who then grew and gave to the world and gave back to him without even knowing it.

Heaven forbid that I should die right after the service or tomorrow, and I stand before Jesus. I really don't know if

I can point to many things in my life and say, “Yeah, I’m proud of that.” But I do know that I can point to Charlotte and say, “Here is my pride and joy.”

My question for all of us here tonight is: Isn’t that what we all want? Don’t we all want to be able to stand before God at the end of our days and point to the people in our lives whom we’ve influenced and say, “Here are the people to whom I gave myself who then grew and gave to the world. Here is my pride and my joy”?

I think we all have this desire because God gave us desire and this is, in fact, a God-like desire. C. S. Lewis said that “[c]reatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.” I think satisfaction to this desire to give ourselves to other people so that they can grow is most easily found within a small group.

Some of you may be in a small group. That’s great. Because I don’t want this message to be totally irrelevant to you, I just want to give a few options or a few suggestions you can ponder and think about doing, as Ken mentioned earlier.

One option: Would you consider co-leading with your leader, taking the burden off his or her shoulders? Maybe it’s facilitating the discussion or leading the group in a prayer or organizing the fun social nights. Whatever it is, we all have a gift to give; we just need to know how to give it.

Another option may be that your group has a few spaces and there’s a Charlotte in your life that you’re thinking about inviting. Well, let me just stop you right there and say, “Please, would you invite her?”

Lastly, you might be Charlotte yourself. You might have a friend who’s been coming here for a while; you’ve been coming here for a while. Your friend’s been nagging you or asking you to join her small group, and you’re not really sure about this whole small group thing. Could I encourage you to take a plunge or a step? John Ortberg says that you can’t walk on water if you don’t step out of the boat. Would you consider just joining this group for a season? See what you can give – because obviously I think we all want to give things to people – and see what they can give to you, and then see what they get from you and what you get from them.

For some of us who are not in a small group, maybe Ken and I have convinced you that, indeed, “circles are better than pews” – or, better yet, the Spirit has moved you into really believing that. Here are a few options for you.

Why don’t you get together in an intentional relationship of giving and getting with one or two other people? Get together with a few other friends and just talk about God, talk about life and pray for each other. It doesn’t have to be complicated; it just has to be intentional.

Option B: If you’re ready for a small group, why don’t you consider coming to GroupLink? We’re actually going to have another one specifically for this Life Together emphasis, and that’s going to be happening on Wednesday, October 23rd.

But maybe you and a few other friends have already been talking about small groups and this message is totally irrelevant to you – you guys already want to form a group. That is awesome! Ken and I would love to just help in any way that we can. In fact, Ken and I host a leadership training course every couple of months to prepare small group leaders to have a successful small group. If you’re interested in that, we have a booth right outside with more information about our small group leader training course as well as people who have taken the course and will answer any questions that you have.

If all of those are a little too intimate and you’re just not ready for that just yet, would you consider maybe going to a midsize community, a gathering of about 20-40 people such as The Lounge or Resonate or any of the other midsize communities that we have? You can find more information on our website.

Lastly, at the very least, would you consider joining The City? Yes, it's online, and no, it's not in a small group, but it is a step in the right direction. You get to be friends with Jay Ewing and Ken Shigematsu— If you get on it right now, Ken doesn't have that many friends, so he'll actually respond to you! Don't tell him I said that! But that's a good chance, and so, if for no other reason, why don't you sign up for The City to do that?

I'm going to end with just one thought, and that thought is this: I think one of the most beautiful and amazing things about our faith is that we believe in a God who doesn't want us to do this thing we call "life" alone. This spiritual journey – he actually wants us and desires for us to do it with others. In fact, he's designed us for a Life Together. He's designed us to celebrate together, to cry together, to play together, to watch movies together – even to watch the Canucks lose together! He's designed us to give together and to get together. All *together*.

I hope you're convinced tonight – better yet, amazed and just in awe – that the God we worship is a God who has designed us for a Life Together.

KEN PIERCE:

When Jesus was here, on the earth, he had these times of solitude; Scripture talks a lot about him being alone with God. He also had times in the temple and with other people, kind of like what we're doing today – maybe without all the drums and stuff, but he had these times as well. But he also had a lot of time with his own little small group. There were twelve of them, and they spent a lot of time walking together (walking long distances together!), talking together, doing Life Together, eating. And he had this really close group of three: Peter, James and John.

During some of his hardest moments on the earth, these Twelve or these three were really close to him. When he was sweating drops of blood in the garden, he asked them, "Can you just stay with me? Can you be with me? I know that you're tired. Hang in there. Pray with me." When he was on the mountain and God appeared before him, Peter, James and John were brought up with him; and there were other times when he brought those three in and did special things with them.

Jesus had a small group from the very beginning. In fact, he himself would design that way. His first small group was with the Father and the Spirit – the three of them make up the very first small group. You see, he, too, was designed that way, just like we are.

You could be a lone charcoal in a sea of briquettes, trying to catch fire, with someone dousing lighter fluid on you constantly. And then someone could just stack you up a little bit into a pyramid, circle you up into a group, and you could get that energy that comes from God's transforming power.

Can I suggest that you give circles a try and allow God to shape you by doing Life Together in that circle? Or allow God to give through you to someone else in that circle.

Life Together: It really is how we were designed. So, what are you waiting for?

I want to pray and close.

Lord, I know that there are not really any strong arguments that could replace how you move into people's hearts, and so that's what I'm really trusting. As cute as Ryan is and as old as I am, it really depends on your Spirit. We don't depend on our own flesh and our own words or anything else that we've said here tonight; we trust you.

Lord, what is it that you are doing in every life here? What is it? What step is it that each person is called to take?

For some of us, we're not even sure about you yet. What would be the next step for those who are curious about you or curious about this thing called Christianity and this person called Jesus? What is that step, Lord? Maybe someone needs to be brought home tonight.

Lord, for some of us we need to begin giving away. For those of us who are in that boat, help us to give ourselves away.

Father, some of us need to become less isolated and less alone. Even though some of us have had even bad experiences in small groups, I pray that that will not define us and our experiences. Some of us are really introverted, and we've been wired up that way – help us not let *that* define us as well.

Help us to stand and sit side by side and hear the Word from your Bible and then go and talk about it and learn how to do Life Together with those around us. It's better that way.

Move us and shape us as your will be done.

Amen.

RECOMMENDED READING

Ortberg, John. *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.

Shigematsu, Ken. "Friendship: Companions for the Journey." *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

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