

“Who’s On Your Speed Dial?”

Ecclesiastes 4:8-12 ¹

One of my first experiences with cell phones took place many years ago at one of Anna’s birthday parties. Since neither Anna nor her friends were old enough to drive, parents brought the other girls to our house.

The party hadn’t been underway for very long when the phone rang. When Jill answered the phone, a parent was calling to be sure where we lived. The other mom said, “I think I’m in front of your house right now,” to which Jill answered, “I don’t think so. There’s no phone in front of our house.” And the world hasn’t been the same since.

I think I got my first cell phone in 1993, though I don’t remember what it was. Having the phone was nice, but I still had to carry around my *Zaurus* PDA in order to have my contacts and calendar, and I longed for the day when all of my portable digital life would be in the phone. And then, just ten years ago, Steve Jobs gave me an iPhone.

Well, it wasn’t really Steve Jobs, of course, and he didn’t give it to me. I paid quite a bit of money to have one, as I still do to this day, but it really is true that, no matter what I’m trying to do, “there’s an app for that.” Life is good.

Thanks to a program called *SugarSync*, I can actually access any file on any of my computers from my phone, and it continues to be wonderfully helpful to have my calendar and my contacts close at hand wherever I am. There are over 3,600 contacts in my phone, together with supporting information of many kinds. It’s wonderful.

While newer gizmos like Siri and Cortana allow us to make calls just by saying, “Hey, Siri! Call Jill’s cell phone,” pretty much any phone these days has a feature known as “speed dial.” Different phones work somewhat differently, but the basic idea is that numbers we add to our “speed dial” list can be called just by pushing one or two buttons.

Now while it would be interesting to know what requirements you have in order to add a person’s name and number to your contact list, it would be even more interesting to know your requirements in order to add a name or number to your speed dial list. **How does someone become important enough to you to get on your speed dial list?**

This question causes me to think of a passage in Ecclesiastes—the same one we read earlier:

⁹ Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. ¹⁰ If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. ¹¹ Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? ¹² A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

I’d like to think about this passage with you briefly using the words “cooperation,” “compassion,” “closeness” and “commission”—one word for each verse.²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 5, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² I got this basic idea from my friend, Dr. Bob Jones, though I’ve taken it in a different direction than he did.

Cooperation: ⁹ *Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.*

When I think about this verse, the image that comes to my mind first is the face of Pastor Age Bota. I worked with Age ten years ago when I was helping to plant churches in Malawi.

Age had walked for a whole day to reach the area in which we were working, and he spent the whole week with us with nothing but the clothes on his back. When each day's work was done and my South African partner and I headed back to our camp, 80 kilometers away, Age spent the night in whatever village we had worked that day. He slept on the floor in the open mud brick home of whichever village family would take him in.

After watching this happen for several days, I told Age, "Age, you're not going to believe me, but there are ways in which you are far wealthier than I am. Sure, we Americans have lots of stuff, but the networks of friendship and cooperation I see you experience here in Malawi represent wealth of a different sort that is more meaningful than any wealth that possessions can bring." He didn't believe me, but it was true, nonetheless.

A famous example of somewhat similar cooperation in the western world is the "Inklings" group that met from 1933-1963 in Oxford, England.³ The Inklings were a collection of friends who were authors and who met every week to talk about their lives and to critique each other's writing efforts.

The most famous members of the group were C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (among many other writings) were made finer through that critique. Ecclesiastes tells us that *two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.*

Compassion: ¹⁰ *If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.*

My life in Columbia may well represent the very first time that I've ever lived "by myself." And living in such a situation makes me acutely aware of the need to pay attention to things I never used to worry very much about. As just one example, I'm very careful to never, ever be without my keys in my pocket so I don't lock myself out of the house.

And if I were to fall down the stairs in my condo, or have a stroke or a heart attack, I sometimes wonder how long it would take for someone to find me. I read just this week about someone who had been dead in her apartment for more than a year before anyone noticed.

I had an elderly friend in another city who fell while transferring herself from her wheelchair to her bed and was unable to reach the phone. She had to lie on the floor all night until a caregiver arrived the next morning (and after that she finally agreed to get one of those call button things).

Ecclesiastes tells us that *if one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.* I suspect that we would all rush to help someone who fell in our presence; but who would you call if you fell at home and couldn't get up? That's where that "speed dial" thing becomes pretty important, and it leads us to the third theme in our text

³ The Inklings met from 1933-1950 at Lewis's rooms in Magdalen College at Oxford. From 1950-1963, they met at the *Eagle & Child Pub* in Oxford. Other participants included Warren Lewis, R. E. Havard, Charles Williams, Nevill Coghill, Hugo Dyson, Owen Barfield, and Adam Fox.

Closeness: ¹¹ *Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone?*

Although we could certainly focus on the physical closeness and warmth mentioned in the text, I want to take “closeness” in a slightly different direction and talk about “friendship.” And I want to highlight the fact that, since it launched twelve years ago, *Facebook* has considerably altered some of our ideas about friendship.

If you have a *Facebook* account, how many “friends” you have? One researcher concluded that the average number of friends people have on *Facebook* is about 150.

This researcher conducted a survey to find out how many of those 150 *Facebook* friends would express sympathy in a time of need or distress, and the results showed “about 14.” But when the question became how many of those “friends” would actually help in a time of need, the average answer was 4. Four. That’s less than 3%. I doubt that you will be surprised for me to observe that most of our relationships on *Facebook* are essentially insignificant.⁴

Compare that kind of relationship with Bob Greene’s friend, Jack. Bob’s wife died unexpectedly, and he and his children were catapulted into the depths of crisis and grief. The very next morning, Bob answered the phone to hear the voice of his old friend, Jack. Bob describes what happened next:

“I’m in Chicago,” he said. I misunderstood him; I thought he was offering to come to Chicago.

“I took the first flight this morning,” he said. He had heard; he had flown in. ‘I know you probably don’t want to see anyone,’ he said. ‘That’s all right. I’ve checked into a hotel, and I’ll just sit in the room in case you need me to do anything. I can do whatever you want, or I can do nothing.’

“He meant it. He knew the best thing he could do was to be present in the same town; to tell me he was there. And he did just sit there—I assume he watched TV, or did some work, but he waited until I gathered the strength to say I needed him. He helped me with things no man ever wants to need help with; mostly he sat with me and knew I did not require conversation, did not welcome chatter, did not need anything beyond the knowledge he was there. He brought food for my children and, by sharing my silence, he got me through those days.”⁵

So how many friends do you have who are like Jack? Four? Three? Two? One?

Though you and I need each other now as much as or more than ever, one study at the University of Chicago revealed that we Americans have fewer people in whom we can confide today than was the case in past generations. In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. By 2004, that number had dropped to two. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004.

⁴ Chris Matyszczyk, “You can only really count on 4 of your 150 Facebook friends, study says,” CNET.com (1-20-16); Meredith Cunningham, “Only 4 of your 150 Facebook friends would help you in a crisis,” Kim Commando blog (1-22-16).

⁵ Bob Greene, *And You Know You Should Be Glad: A True Story of Lifelong Friendship* (William Morrow, 2006).

If that survey is accurate, one out of every four of us says we have no close friends—zero, zilch, none.⁶ When those persons look at their “speed dials,” there are no names there at all.

Now I suspect you know that the secret to having friends—real friends—on your speed dial is that **in order to have a friend, we’ve got to be a friend**. One of the problems with *Facebook* is that it tends to focus on narcissism, self-promotion, and external validation. We focus on clever postings, perfect photos, and we count our “likes,” our “followers” and our *Facebook* “friends.” Sadly, it’s awfully easy for social media to be not about real friends at all, but actually all about ME.

Let me take this in a slightly different direction. When was the last time that you scanned a group of people, at church or elsewhere, not to find someone you knew or someone who might be able to help you in some way, but in order to discover someone you did not know or someone you might be able to help or encourage in some way? The way we develop friends is to think about what we can do for them, not what they can do for us.

The way we develop friends is to spend time with them. The way we develop friends is to walk across the room and to say “Hello!” And that brings us to our fourth and last verse

Commission: ¹² *A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*

The most obvious meaning here has to do with protection. For the first several years that I lived in Columbia, I enjoyed walking our many pathways fairly often. I walked alone, and sometimes late into the night. For the last year or so, though, there have been a number of armed robberies in the Hickory Ridge and Harper’s Choice neighborhoods, and I don’t go walking alone any more.

Sad as it is, that’s the general idea of the last verse of our text, but there’s a happier way to understand the verse, as well. You and I are far more likely to be “attacked” by the problems and difficulties of life than we are to be attacked by robbers. And in these much-more-likely challenges, it is still the case that journeying together in friendship keeps us safer, healthier, and more joyful.

Here’s one more story that brings this all together. It’s from a pastor named Bill Hinson:⁷

“I will never forget an experience I had when I went back to Emory for an advanced degree. I’d been a pastor for a good while, and was therefore one of the oldest people in the class. There was another older pastor in the class, but we sat across the room from one another. It was a little lonely, because we didn’t have much in common with the younger students.

“One day I decided to get to know the other older fellow, who happened to be the only African American in the class. So at the end of the class, I said to him, ‘How about having lunch today?’

“He said, ‘Fine. Where do you want to go?’

“I said, ‘Well, let’s try the cafeteria.’

“We went to the cafeteria and enjoyed lunch and began to talk about our churches. I discovered that he serves one of the largest predominantly black Baptist churches in the country.

⁶ Janet Kornblum, “Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In,” *USA Today*, June 23, 2006.

⁷ William Hinson, “A Breath of Fresh Air,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 114.

We began to talk about our work. And out of that there grew a friendship, so that during the rest of our residency experiences, we were together most of the time.

“Toward the end of our residency, he invited me to go home with him one weekend to preach in his church. I was excited to have such an opportunity, but he said something as he introduced me to the congregation that choked me up so much I found it difficult to continue. Here’s what he said:

“The day that I met this man was a critical day in my life. That very morning, I had told God that if I didn’t meet someone that day who said “Hello” to me and who wanted to spend some time with me, who wanted to be my friend, then I was going to give up on my education. I was going to come back home.’

Reflecting on that moment, Dr. Hinson wrote, “I still get all choked up when I think about that moment. It was such a small gesture—‘How about lunch?’—and out of that impulse, that spiritual prompting, came one of my best friends in the world.”

So here’s the bottom line: When you think about your speed dial, don’t think about who’s on that list for you. Think about who’s list God intends for you to be on as someone who is cooperative, compassionate, and close. Ask God to guide you onto someone else’s speed dial list, and watch what happens then!