

Resting and Wrestling for the Cause of Christ--together

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the dual call to wrestle in prayer and rest in community for the advancement of the Gospel.

Duration: 43:30

Scripture: Psalm 133:1, Matthew 11:28-30, Luke 13:24, John 12:25, Acts 20:28, Romans 15:30, Ephesians 4:12, Hebrews 10:24-25

Topics: "Body Of Christ", "Small Groups"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of healthy biblical doctrine and loving relationships within the body of Christ. It highlights the significance of small groups in fostering these relationships and the need for believers to strive together in prayer, wrestle against spiritual battles, and find rest and refreshment in community. The message encourages participation in small groups for mutual encouragement, sharing burdens, and multiplying joys in the journey of faith.

Transcript

We think and we talk a lot at Bethlehem about the relationship between healthy biblical doctrine and loving, committed relationships. It occupies a lot of our thought, a lot of our talk about how right theology and loving relationships in the body of Christ and out relate to each other. And in the providence of God on this weekend where we are focusing on encouraging our members and regular attenders to be a part of a small group, that this text should be so tailor-made as I'm reading it, to enable me to do what I hope will be a God-blessed motivation to stir you up to move toward the kinds of relationships that are cultivated in small groups if you're not in one already.

And to encourage you to press on in that ministry if you're already in one. It's the most remarkable thing to me how God worked last Sunday's text and this Sunday's text knowing that small group emphasis was coming. And so I hope you'll see what I see in this text.

You need to know, if you're a part of this church, that the elders of this church regard it as one of their most important exercises of their duties to create and nurture and oversee a system of small groups. And the reason for that is that we are called in Acts 20, 28 to take heed to all the flock. And we're going to give an account someday before the King of Kings as to how we went about that, with what faithfulness we

fulfilled this obligation that the elders have to take heed to all the flock.

There were 4,300 people in worship last Sunday, in seven services. Among those, about 2,000 are covenant members. We feel a very special obligation for those who said, this is me.

I'm here. I'm committed. I'm covenant.

We don't feel the same responsibility for the 2,000 hangers-on. Our exhortation to them is, come on in or go to another church. But for these 2,000, that's a huge responsibility.

So Acts 20, 28 is huge at our elder meetings. And then we put alongside it this, Ephesians 4, 12, where our job is described as pastor elders, our job is described as equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. Now I translate that, we translate that, among other ways, like this.

Our caring for all the flock happens in part by equipping saints to care for all the flock. That's what we believe putting Acts 20, 28 and Ephesians 4, 12 beside each other means. We cannot do this by ourselves.

Our chief responsibility under God is to equip you to do the work of the ministry. And among the many works of ministry are the works of one another care, personal, loving, accountable, supportive, caring relationships that we can't have with all of you. If you think that's an exigency created by 21st century megachurches and it really shouldn't be that way, I would just invite you to imagine Pentecost.

You've got 120 believers and in a day it's now 3,000. You've got 11 apostles and they're totally taken off guard, maybe, by 3,000 converts. Then Acts 5 says you've got 5,000 more men a few months later, converted men.

How many women and children are coming with them? So now you've got a church of 15,000 people probably in Jerusalem with 11 leaders desperately trying to train other leaders. This has always been this way where the church is alive. It's just always been this way.

There will never be a day when you have one elder handling about 30 people, which is what maybe an elder could manage. It'll never be that way where the spirit is moving. We'll always be playing catch up.

We'll always be trying to figure this thing out, and we are. And small group ministry is just one of the ways, a major one, that we elders believe is so crucial, which is why David Livingston pours his whole life into making this happen with Amy's help. Thank God for that team to put that together.

So here's what I want to do. I want to get the big picture of Romans in front of us about relationships and theology, and then we're going to go to our text and see what it has to say about this issue. So to get the big picture in front of us, go with me to chapter 1 of Romans.

This is back eight years. Romans 1, verses 9 to 15, and just the big picture is this. At the beginning of the letter, chapter 1, at the end of the letter, chapter 15, with all this huge theology in the middle, Paul begins and ends with big, heartfelt statements about love and relationships with this church.

So listen to the way he talks and ask yourself, do I feel feelings like that? Do I say things like that? Do I live like this man is modeling for us to live? Verse 9, God is my witness. It's almost an oath he wants to take about this important issue. God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of His Son, that without ceasing, I mention you.

Always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may at last succeed in coming to you. I don't like this distance thing. I want to be there.

For I long to see you. This is a longing in his heart, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you. That is, lest it sound too heavy handed, that is that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

I want to get from you. I want to give to you. I want this thing to be reciprocal.

Verse 13, I want you to know, brothers, that I've often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I might reap some harvest among you, as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and barbarians, both to wise and to foolish, so I'm eager to preach the Gospel to you also who are in Rome. Now the level of importance of these relationships is unmistakable.

I pray without ceasing, and I mention you when I pray. I long to see you. I want us to encourage each other and share spiritual gifts.

I have often intended to come to you, but I've been hindered. I would love to be used by God to get some harvest and fruit among you. I'm under obligation to you.

I'm your servant. You talk like that? Are there people you think about like that? Let's go to chapter 15. Chapter 15, we're going to back up to where we were some weeks ago and start at verse 22 and just read a couple of verses there, and then go to our text in a moment.

Verse 22 of Romans 15, this is the reason why I have so often been hindered. So he mentioned in chapter 1 that he'd been hindered, and now he's giving you the reason 15 chapters later. This is the reason I have been hindered from coming to you, namely that he's been fulfilling his holy ambition to preach the Gospel there.

But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be helped on my journey there by you once I have enjoyed your company for a while. So get behind me as I go to Spain. I'm going to stay a little while with you.

I really am looking forward to how happy I'm going to be when I'm there. You talk like that? You love people like that? Does being with other believers do that for you? I hope so. The emphasis is unmistakable.

I've longed for years to come. I hope to see you as I go to Spain. I want you to get behind me.

I want to enjoy your presence. Don't miss that last comment. I want to enjoy your company for a while.

That's not idolatry, though it could be. It doesn't have to be. To enjoy people does not have to make you an idolater as though you're not enjoying God.

And my way of putting it together is like this. God loves to awaken more joy in Himself through our brothers and sisters. We know more of God.

We see more of God. We enjoy more of God when we hang out with God-besotted people. That's why God created a church and not isolated individuals sparkling like little stars all over the world.

He didn't do that. He created churches and togetherness. And in a big church, you've got to work at small togetherness because it's not a given that if somebody walks in here on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning, he's going to find any friend.

It's not a given. But it ought to happen sooner or later and sooner better than later. Okay, here we are at our text now, verses 28 to 33.

I preached on this text in 1997. Two sermons during prayer week. I'll tell you what my points were and then I'll not pay any attention to them anymore.

The point nine years ago, did I do my math right? Nine years ago on this text was that Paul asks for two things that they pray about. Verse 30, second part of the verse, Strive, strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf now for two things. What? That I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.

So he's got two concerns. One, I'm going to get in trouble with unbelievers and they might kill me. And the other is, these saints for whom I've been collecting this money may not like it.

They may say, we don't want your charity. That might happen. And so he asked the Romans, pray that those two things not happen.

And my point nine years ago was, in response to prayer, God changes human wills. Otherwise there ain't no point in praying. So, you've got wills of unbelievers who might be exercised to kill Paul or put him in jail.

He's assuming and saying, pray that that not happen, that God can make it not happen. Why else ask it? And when he says, pray that the believers would welcome me rather than spurning me, he's assuming God can move into the heart of a believer and make them that way. So my point was, prayer assumes the sovereignty of God over the human will.

The sovereignty of God over the human will is not a problem for prayer, it's the basis of prayer. That was nine years ago. I'm not going to talk about that again tonight, this morning.

I'm going to talk about two simple and wonderful things that I see here. Now before I tell you what they are and point you to them in the text, I want to admit, I know that Paul is not talking about a small group here. I know that, I know that.

These believers are hundreds of miles away, as he writes. And he doesn't know most of them. He hopes to meet them.

But my point is, that if he can talk about strangers that he hopes to meet, that he's separated from by hundreds of miles, if he can talk about them this way, then all the more should we want these kinds of things to happen among each other here and in our small groups. So that's the way I'm thinking, even though I know he's not talking about small groups. So here are the two simple, wonderful things.

Let's go back and read verses 30-32 again, and I will underline them as we go. Two things that I hope happen in our small groups. I appeal to you brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me.

So mark that, strive together with me, in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that, by

God's will, I may come to you, now mark this, with joy and be refreshed in your company. Those are the two things. Striving together with Paul, and Paul being refreshed with joy in their company.

And it is no stretch to find two words that will be easy to remember. Wrestling together, and resting together. That's what I want to happen in our small groups.

Wrestling, not against each other, trying to pin each other, but rather side by side against a common enemy, the flesh, the world, and the devil. Wrestling together, and then at the end of verse 32, with joy, being refreshed in each other's company. Wrestling, and resting.

Wrestling, and resting. Together. Together.

So make sure that you see this. The word strive together, there in verse 30, strive together, could be translated fight, wrestle, struggle, strive. And then the word for be refreshed, to rest, in verse 32.

Now I want to do two things with these words, these realities. One is to step back and notice with you that they are simply the way the Christian life is. Wrestling and resting marks the whole of the Christian life, and then close by noting that Paul wants them to happen together, not alone.

Doesn't want you wrestling alone, doesn't want you resting alone, always anyway. He wants you resting with people, and wrestling with people. So let's do the first thing, and just notice how normal these are for Christian living, and think about that for a moment.

I'm going to go to Jesus and let Him make the point for us, in the wider text, wider context. Luke 13, 24 says this, this is Jesus talking, strive, virtually the same word, just doesn't have the together part, strive to enter through the narrow door. Strive, Christians, strive to enter heaven through the narrow door.

Very much like Romans 15, 30, strive together with me in your prayers. Why? Why does there need to be any striving? He tells us in Matthew 7, 13, enter by the narrow gate, this is what He said to strive to enter, enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction. Those who enter by it are many.

For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. So Christian living, strive to go through the narrow gate, strive to stay on the hard way that leads to life. This is like two weeks ago, John 12, 25.

Whoever loves his life in this world and chooses the broad way and the easy door will perish, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. The pathway that leads to life is a life of wrestling, a pathway of wrestling. The reason is because so many of our inclinations are suicidal.

The reason there has to be so much self-renunciation in the Christian life is because there's so much sin that makes us want to do suicidal things. They don't look suicidal, they just are. And the Bible tells us, and therefore if we love life, if we want to live, we will deny ourselves apparently pleasant things that will kill us.

Arsenic may taste really good, and therefore it will look like self-denial to say no thank you when it's offered to you. But in fact, in eternity it's not self-denial, it is salvation. The reason there has to be so much wrestling is because we are sinners.

That's not the whole story. Life is not just war, it's also rest. So put over against Matthew 7, 13 and 14, Matthew 11, 28 to 30, it goes like this.

Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you... What's the word? Rest. Not wrestling. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart.

And you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light. Amen.

Thank you, Jesus. Then it's not just wrestling. Rest for your souls, easy yoke, light burden, that's what it means to follow Jesus.

Rest for your soul, light burden, easy yoke, that's what it means to follow Jesus. So, strive to enter through the narrow door, life is war, fight the good fight, wrestle with Me. Come to Me, find rest, find a light yoke, find an easy burden.

And of course, you and I ask, how in the world can that be? How do you live that? I mean, that's just a flat contradiction. You can't... Jesus, please help... It's just like Him, He's always talking that way. Things that just seem so hard.

Now, my main point in this message is not to answer that question, but I'll give you the short answer because I want to talk mainly about doing it together. But here's the short answer. The reason wrestling and resting are both the mark of this road that leads to life is because our hearts do not naturally rest in all that God is for us in Jesus.

If you were wired to rest moment by moment, soul rest, soul satisfaction, sweet soul contentment, in Jesus alone, you wouldn't have to wrestle. Nobody's wired that way. Nobody on planet earth is wired that way.

Everybody is wired to rest in money, sex. My soul wants this picture, and I can't find soul rest. Or a woman, my soul wants to be held like that, and I can't rest until I find a man who will do that for me.

There's no rest. My soul rests in food, whole packages of cookies. My soul rests in looks.

My soul rests in family and the kids' right behavior. My soul rests in physique or athletic accomplishment. I don't rest in Jesus.

That's why you've got to wrestle. That's why you've got to fight. That's why you've got to kill yourself.

That's why you've got to hate your life in this world. That's why the road is narrow that leads to life. We're all wired to rest anywhere but in Jesus.

Jesus says, come to Me, and I'll give you rest for your souls. Other shelters offer rest. Other yokes seem easy, easier.

Other burdens feel light, and they are all an illusion. In the end, they destroy and enslave, and only Jesus gives deep and lasting rest and joy. Jesus is the only person who, when He gives you a burden, like He gives a burden, He lifts it.

Remember how He criticized the lawyers? You are those who load men with burdens hard to bear, and do not lift one of your fingers to help them. That's the way He talked about the Pharisees and the lawyers. Well, what's the difference between Him and them? No burden? No.

Fingers. One divine finger, and your burden is light. Or picture this.

I asked somebody to paint this for me 25 years ago, and Barb Beck did origami and made it for me. I lost it. So if somebody wants to make another one, here it is.

Jesus is the farmer. I'm paraphrasing now in visual form the end of verse 30 of Matthew 11. My yoke is light.

Okay? Now, I don't know much about farming or plows, so forgive me if you know more. So I have got now my hands on an old-fashioned plow. It goes down into a plow, and there's an ox.

And this ox has some kind of yoke on it, and He's helping me pull this plow. And I don't know how the rigging works, but Jesus' hands are on the plow, and I'm the ox. And we've got some work to do together in Bethlehem Baptist Church.

And Jesus, with these forearms that look like Popeye, some of you have never heard of Popeye, takes the yoke and starts going like this, and just twists His wrist so that the ox, which weighs 1,500 pounds, is dangling in the yoke. His feet aren't on the ground. And Jesus is pushing the plow.

I like that picture. That's my life. And if that weren't my life, I wouldn't survive.

This yoke is easy. You better stay in that yoke. A lot of other yokes offered you, and they often look like they make more of you and less of Him.

And that feels good. Dangling is not praiseworthy to the world, just to God. Come dangle with me.

There is another kind of wrestling beside the kind that is against your own preferences. It's the kind that Paul refers to here in Romans 15. Sometimes unbelievers conspire to hinder the cause of the Gospel, and even threaten the lives of Christians or missionaries.

And that concerns us. That creates a wrestling of soul, because we're to call out to God that it not happen. That's what he's doing here in Romans 15.

Wrestle with me that the enemies of the Gospel in Jerusalem would not have the last say, and that I would be able to make my presentation and then move on back to Rome and Spain. Pray that with me. Pray that with me.

Wrestle with me. So there's a wrestling that's not primarily against our own inclinations. It's a wrestling in the world against the devil, and against all the influences of evil in the world to hold them back, so that they don't get in the way of the Gospel.

We want the Gospel to run and triumph, and it concerns us, and we wrestle in prayer. We don't wrestle with guns. We don't wrestle with bombs and swords.

No Christian advances the Gospel with guns. We don't kill to advance the Gospel. We die to advance the Gospel.

Is that clear? So we talk about wrestling here, even against principalities, or against the inclinations of unbelievers to hinder the Gospel. We don't mean wrestle against them by getting in their face with a gun, or a sword, or a bomb. We mean we go to God and plead for their conversion.

We go to God and plead for their restraint. So, wrestling. And I should say, because I know you felt the tension of the resting and wrestling, in the best case scenario, and it is possible, resting is not canceled out during wrestling.

Can you handle this? Resting can happen during wrestling. When I thought that thought, because I know I've experienced it, and I don't know how else to make sense out of much of the Scriptures, I thought of the hymn that they sang just before they went to Ecuadorian river, jungle, beach, and were speared to death. We rest on Thee, we rest, we rest on Thee, our shield and our defender.

We go, we go not forth alone against the foe. Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender. We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go.

I love that song. I love the men who gave their lives singing it. Because you feel it? Go rest, go rest, go rest.

Go into the face of a spear, resting. That's life, that's glorious life. That is glorious life.

Resting deep in soul as you tremble at the noise behind the trees. What will it bring? It is possible. I could tell you so many stories from here, and mainly from missionaries, like John Patton's experience in the tree.

But I won't go there again. Let me draw things to a close by stressing, I said I wanted to do two things with these words, wrestle and resting. One was to show you that it's normal Christian life.

Now I'm closing by saying the main point of this small group emphasis weekend is God wants us to do that together. He wants us to do it together. So let's look at the text.

Verse 30. Romans 15, 30. Strive, that's what we've been talking about for the last 15 minutes.

Strive, wrestle, together with Me. Together with Me. If that's true across hundreds of miles with people He hardly knows, how much more true in a small group.

So my question for you is, are you surrounded by a band of brothers and sisters who do that for you, daily? I won't ask you to raise your hand, but I'm saying that's normal Christianity. That's vital Christianity. That's necessary Christianity.

Are you surrounded by a band of brothers and sisters who do that, strive with you for your own sins and other sins and all the situations you face that threaten your soul? They strive with you daily. You don't meet daily necessarily, but they're praying for you daily. I pray for this whole staff here by name every day.

And all the elders at 33, that's harder. I've got them all memorized. And almost every day for the elders.

And then there's my family. And then there's Carsten and Shelley and Millie and Francis and Abel and Benjamin and Melissa and Oscar and Lilia and Abraham and Molly and Orison and Barnabas and Leslie and Grace who's being dedicated in Wheaton tomorrow. That's why Noel's not here.

I've got this circle of people I take to the Lord and plead and wrestle for their souls day after day. Are you surrounded by anybody that does that for you? If not, that's what we're trying to help you with. That's what we're trying to help you with.

If you feel cut off from this kind of precious partnership, 80 of these groups are ready to take you in. And there's a little tear-off piece that's perforated like that at the back with places that say I've looked at the groups and I would like to be considered for this group on page 40. And then, finally, verse 32, so that, isn't that interesting, that logically Paul puts his joy in their company for refreshment as the goal of the triumph in Jerusalem.

That's amazing. I want to be delivered in Jerusalem. I want to have triumph over these unbelievers and acceptance with these believers and bring all this to a conclusion in my 2,000 mile detour so that I can enjoy you folks in Rome.

So that I can enjoy the Christians in Rome. You see that? So that I may with joy be refreshed in your company. Between the battles, and yes, in the battles, there's rest together.

God loves to refresh you through your people, His people. God loves to refresh you through His people. If you're not refreshed in your faith, then ask, am I in a connection, am I in a connectedness so that this would happen? Have I set things up in my life so that this could happen? Or have I avoided, have I, I was brought up a loner.

I don't like this sort of stuff. This feels touchy-feely to me. Well, you know what? You can find a bunch of people just like you who don't want to do touchy-feely, but they kind of like people a little bit.

And to hang out with that kind of person would be kind of safe and okay. You really can mix it up like that. We're all weird.

We're all sick. We're all broken. We're all lame emotionally.

So just deal with it. If you ask the question to Paul here, which I did, Paul, how does that refreshment happen? What's it look like? How does that refreshment happen? When you get there, how's it going to happen? He gave an answer to that in chapter 1, verse 12, and it went like this. He said, I want to see you so that, quote, we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

You know how that looks? Every little triumph of faith in your life is designed for my refreshment if we have a relationship. It's designed for my refreshment. Don't keep it to yourself.

If you got the slightest victory over some temptation this week, if you got the slightest help and encouragement to share the Gospel this week, share it. Because Paul says, my joy comes from this mutual encouragement of their faith. How does he know they have any faith? He sees things.

He hears things. And when he sees Jesus getting victory in their lives, his faith, can you imagine the Apostle Paul getting encouragement from this peon in Rome? Amazing. That's the way it works.

If you come up here to the front of the inn and ask for prayer, and you tell me just one little triumph in your life, I am so encouraged. I am so helped. And so would others be.

I think that's the way the joy spreads, is that we go to these groups, and while we focus on the Word in part, then we hear about where we're stumbling, we pray for each other, we're patient with each other, we lift each other up, and we hear little triumphs and big triumphs. If I was in a small group, I would talk about Willie tonight. Met him on Chicago Avenue this morning, doing my thing.

Willie, how can I pray for you? Answer. Pray that my dad be a better man. Pray that my dad be a better man.

I said, I will. What's his name? I better not say the name, that might make too many connections. But I've been praying for him all day.

Gave him a little red book. Willie, would you take this on the bus? He said, bus is coming. I said, I know.

So take this. So here's a sign and a wonder. Dad changes.

Willie remembers. And Willie and Dad get saved. I would just talk about that story tonight in my small group.

I would just say that. That's no big deal. I did not do a very good job sharing the Gospel this morning.

I just did what I could do. Just did what I could do. That's all we ever do.

We do what we can do. We press on, try to do better. So, my closing word would go something like this.

In my exhortation for you, south, downtown, Sunday morning, here, tonight, is that God is being kind to you in this exhortation. You know why? Because if you follow through on this, He will cut in half your burdens by causing others to share them. And He will double your joys by causing others to share them.

That's the way human beings are wired. We are wired to want our burdens to be cut in half and our joys to be doubled. And it happens in the same dynamic of togetherness.

So, after I pray, we're going to sing a song. It's an old-fashioned song. Blessed be the tie that binds.

Now, I don't know whether you know the last two verses. There are six, not four, verses to this song. All the hymnals have four verses.

There are six. And the reason, did you find them? We got them. And so I assume you've got them.

So we're all going to sing this. All seven campuses, sing it. Blessed be the tie that binds.

And the reason the last two verses matter is because the fourth verse ends with when we are apart. It ends. And the next two verses put it in the author's intended context of eternity.

He means death. And so that's what's going to happen someday. And I said when I got back from sabbatical, I hope I can die at Bethlehem.

I know I shouldn't stay in this pulpit until I'm senile. But if I could just hang around the edges, then maybe a few would be left to bury me. And you'd sing a song about when we're apart, there is still a tie that binds.

So let me pray. And then on all the campuses, we're going to sing that song. Father in Heaven, I pray that You'd move Your people into the kind of relationships that would let what happened in this text happen in their lives.

Wrestling together. Refreshment and resting together. Lord, don't let any of us hang on the fringes.

Get us connected with Your God-besotted children for the cutting in half of our pain and the doubling of our pleasure. I pray this in Jesus' name.

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