

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 – “Spiritual Gifts: Working As One Body”

The story is told of the big lumberjack who bought a brand new chainsaw and was told it could cut down at least 100 trees a day.

But on the first day he only managed to cut down 25 trees. The next day he tried harder and finally cut down 33 trees. The third day he started early, worked late, and even cut his lunch break short, but he still managed to cut down only 48 trees.

He went back to the store and confronted the manager with his complaint. He told him of his efforts and of the results. The manager couldn't quite understand what had gone wrong, so he asked to take a look. He grabbed the starter rope and pulled hard, and the motor started with a roar.

The lumberjack jumped back in alarm and yelled, “Hey, what’s dat loud noise?”

- A lot of Christians operate this way, not aware of the supply of power available to them. They’re sweating it out and grinding it out trying to do the work, or live a Christ-like life in themselves, but they’re neglecting the working of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been poured out in our lives to energize us to live lives that bring glory to God and blessing to one another.
- And it’s this topic of gifts of the Holy Spirit that we’ve been dealing with in this particular section of our study through 1 Corinthians. Paul’s main emphasis is to reveal how the Spirit unifies us and how the gifts are meant to build each other up in edification and unity.
- As we wrap up Chapter 12, we’ll really take a deep dive into the function of the church and what the outcome should be from the right operation of these gifts.

1. One Body and Direction – 12:12-14

(detailing the source of gifts)

12:12 - *For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.*

Paul moves into a great illustration of how these various gifts and workings of the Spirit are to profit all. He likens the church to a body. You look around and you see a lot of bodies here, but isn't it amazing to think of all the different functions and operations happening within those bodies. There's so many different moving parts and yet everything is happening in sync and working together for the common good!

Paul, through the illustration of our own physical bodies, reveals how there's many parts, many members, but they act in unity as one body. In like manner, the body of Christ is to operate this way.

- When Paul says, ***so also is Christ***, he is referring to those who are linked to Christ – the body of Christ. He is the head of the church, and those that have put their faith in Jesus are in Christ, they're the church – the body of Christ!

So within the body of Christ there should be a wonderful expression of unity. But where does that unity flow from? The Spirit! Read on...

12:13-14 - *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. ¹⁴ For in fact the body is not one member but many.*

It's through the Holy Spirit that we are baptized into this body.

This verse has led some to believe that this speaks of an actual water baptism that is needed to be a part of the family of God. And this has further led to the unbiblical practice of infant baptism, with the thought of not wanting to exclude them from the family of God. But this is not the idea behind this verse.

We know that the Word says at conversion, we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

- **Ephesians 1:13–14**, *"In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."*

This word baptism speaks of identification (this was referenced in 1 Cor 10:2). We become linked to the body of Christ through the Spirit Who now indwells us. The same Spirit that's in me is also in you. Despite there being a difference between the members, there is still to be a unity. We have the same DNA running through us!

And the beauty of this is the body of Christ does not make membership a difficult thing. It's very open and inclusive (***whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free***). No matter who you are, or what you've done, you have access through faith in Christ.

So this body is a blessed thing – when the members realize their uniqueness.

2. One Body and Diversity – 12:15-19

(desiring one another's gifts)

12:15-16 - *If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?*

From this analogy of the body, Paul raises some interesting points now. Within the church, some can begin to get a little jealous over various gifts or callings. Some may think, 'Well, if I can't do that particular function then I'm not going to be a part of the body.'

If everybody were doing the same thing, the body (the church) would be lacking in many areas.

- If the foot were upset that it's not the hand and just checked out, the body would be greatly affected. The foot could go on strike but it doesn't cease to be a part of the body. In fact, it hurts the body by not fulfilling its role.

12:17 - *If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?*

Paul brings up this example because people in the church at Corinth were desiring specific gifts that made them stand out. It was like they all wanted to be the eye. It's front and foremost. It gets to see and be seen. Nobody wants to be the hearing or the smelling. These don't make a person famous.

But if everybody is the eye – well first of all that's going to be one freaky body! But if everybody is the eye, then the body lacks in other areas. It becomes weak and deficient. We need other parts like the hearing and smelling.

- A man was concerned that his wife was losing her hearing and consulted his doctor about it. The doctor said, 'Ok, to gauge how bad her hearing loss is, I want you to stand 15 feet behind her and talk. If she doesn't hear you I want you to stand 10 feet behind her, and if she doesn't hear again, keep moving up 5 feet.' So the man went home and saw his wife in the kitchen preparing dinner and so he stood about 15 feet behind her and asked, 'What are you making for dinner?' No response. So he moved 10 feet behind her and asked again. Still no response. He kept moving until he was right behind her and he asked her one more time, and she turned around and said, 'For the 4th time I said I'm making Chicken Soup!'

12:18-19 - *But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. ¹⁹ And if they were all one member, where would the body be?*

Again, it's not up to you to choose a gift or role in the body, God is the One that sets each member in their place to accomplish His will – not yours! God's purpose is to bring great beauty and unity out of diversity. If everyone was the same, where would the body be? How could it function?

3. One Body and Discrimination – 12:20-24

(disparaging one another's gifts)

12:20-22 - *But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.*

Just as a person should not feel shamed for not being one way, so a person should not be prideful in how they're being used. The eye cannot get puffed up and think it's all that and begin to isolate itself from the body. That's not a great existence, just rolling along the ground getting dirty, and no way to communicate. So too in the body of Christ, there's no member that should begin to feel like he's an island with no need for other members. Each person is needed. You're needed, and you need others!

This doesn't just apply to a specific church body, but to the universal body of Christ. There are many churches, there's differences and uniqueness, yet everyone is fulfilling a part and a roll within the body. We should be slow to disparage other churches and the way they operate or function, because often times they're fulfilling a need that we're not fulfilling. We should be thankful for that extension of the body and the place they are. We shouldn't be saying we have no need of you.

- Now of course this attitude needs to be centered on what is Biblical and true. There's many churches today that are not holding to a view of the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture. This unity always needs to be grounded in truth.
- But just because a church has a different focus or style does not mean they're not part of Christ's body. And we need to be careful that we don't begin to look with judgment or criticism because they're doing something different than us. They may not be as great a church as us but there's no

reason to put them down or view them as weaker 😊. Often times they're going to reach people in a way that we won't, and we'll reach people they won't. But praise the Lord, more people will be reached.

12:23 - *And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty,*

Within the body there is no insignificant part or role. Even the seemingly weaker, or less honorable parts are needed. Some members of the body are not on the front lines, they don't gather a lot of attention, perhaps they're more of the behind the scenes type role. But again, it's no reason to think less of them. In fact, often times it's those members that should receive greater honor.

- I think of my heart or lungs. These guys aren't seen, they're not getting a lot of attention. They've never made an appearance outside of the body. But without them, the hands, the feet, the mouth, wouldn't be able to do much. We're all needed and we need to work together.
- I think of those in the church that serve in ways that often go unnoticed and who's gifts are not always front and center, but they provide such value and blessing to the body.

We see the attention given to parts of the body that are unrepresentable. Very likely Paul was referring to the sexual organs here. We cover them up, they ***have greater modesty***. We give special care to these parts.

- In the same way there are members in the body of Christ that may seem like we want to hide or dismiss, but they're still needed and important. We want to provide care and a covering for them and give them honor because we want to see them flourish as they should in the body.

12:24 - *but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it,*

There are parts of the body that are very comfortable where they're at and in what they do. There are some that are stronger or more mature than others. They don't need a lot of extra care. There are those that may be lacking in the body where those who are more mature can come alongside and strengthen them. In that way it's as though they're ***given greater honor***.

But God has put all people together for the benefit of all. You're a part of the body because God has put you there. And He's put you there with purpose.

4. One Body and Development – 12:25-27

(depending on one another's gifts)

12:25-26 - *that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.* ²⁶ *And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*

A certain sea captain and his chief engineer argued as to which of them was the more important to the ship. Failing to agree, they resorted to the unique plan of swapping places. The Chief ascended to the bridge and the Captain went into the engine room. After a couple of hours the Captain suddenly appeared on the deck covered with oil and soot. "Chief!" he yelled, wildly waving a monkey wrench in the air. "You'll have to come down here; I can't make the ship go!" "Of course you can't," replied the Chief. "I ran her aground!"

- There's no need for schisms in the body when we recognize we all play an important role in the health and well being of the body. No member or role is better or of greater importance in the body. There should be a mutual care for one another because we're all interconnected in Christ and through the Spirit.

Never is that more clear and illustrated through our physical body than when you stub your toe making a snack run in the middle of the night. And it's always that pinky toe that just seems to catch something and you're afraid to look down because you're sure that thing is just hanging there by a thread.

But the pinky toe just seems like an insignificant member, yet when it gets hit you feel that through every part of your body.

So as Paul says, when ***one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.***

And this is not just in some sympathetic or empathetic way, it's to say that we're to be so closely connected that we go through suffering when another suffers.

In the same way, when a member is honored, we rejoice in that too! This can be a lot harder right? But we're talking about the function of the body and what is the function of the body? Building up one another and glorifying God. If one member is honored they've fulfilled that role! And we should rejoice that it was done because that's our objective too! We should see ourselves so unified through the Spirit that we all take part in the honor of a specific member, because we've all contributed to that.

- It's been said, "Real fellowship doubles our joys and divides our grief." It's the way it should be in the church.
- **Romans 12:15**, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."*

12:27 - Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

We're not about being individualistic, but we simply recognize we each have something to offer and it may be very different from one another. We have different functions that complement the body, not compete against the body. The heart is not saying, 'look at how fast I can beat!' That would be detrimental to the body. So we have individual gifts and functions, but a common goal.

5. One Body and Discretion – 12:28-31

(desiring the greater gifts)

12:28 - And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

Again, Paul gives a partial list of some of the ministries and giftings within the church. And his point is that we're not all needing to do the same thing. The body has a greater ministry through its diversity.

It would seem that Paul was giving a list here in descending order of the sequence in which these were carried out in the history of the church.

You can hear of apostles and prophets today who claim authority as spokesmen of God, but I do not believe that we have apostles or prophets today as we had in the New Testament. These were specific functions for the establishment of the church.

- **Ephesians 2:20**, *"having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone,"*

I do believe we have the ministry of these roles continuing on through missionaries and those proclaiming the Word of God. But these are not offices that carry the same weight or authority they would have had in N.T. times.

Here's what Paul is driving home for us:

12:29-30 - Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

This is spoken and arranged in the Greek in a way that necessitates or expects a negative answer. Do all do these things? NO!

- Another clear evidence that speaking in tongues is not the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

12:31 - *But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.*

Now this sounds odd for Paul to tell the believers to desire the best gifts when he's just spent the whole chapter calling out the church for being covetous over certain gifts that individuals wanted to use for self promotion.

This could be understood in a couple different ways:

- 1) This can be rendered that Paul was stating a fact – *you are desiring the best gifts.* (“Therefore, this must be rendered not as an imperative (command), but, as the verb form allows, as an indicative (statement of fact), “You are desiring the showy gifts, wrongly.”) ¹

He's revealing what has been going on in the church.

- 2) This can be spoken to the church as a whole, and how they should desire the best, most helpful gifts to be exercised in the body for the common good of all.

Either way, this is where Paul makes the transition to show them a better more excellent way. The true Christian life is not demonstrated by who operates in the most gifts, or the best gifts. True Christianity is demonstrated by love! And this will take us into the glorious chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 which we'll look at next week.

¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2005). *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (1 Co 12:31). Thomas Nelson.