**ONE BODY, MANY PARTS**

1 Corinthians 12:1-31a, Key Verse 12:27

*“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”*

Did you know that you are a gifted person? It’s because every believer in Jesus is a recipient of spiritual gifts. Today’s passage is famous for being Paul’s discussion on the topic of spiritual gifts. If you’re like me, you like to think about what your gifts might me and how you can cultivate them. But an equally important point Paul makes is that while the Spirit gives all different kinds of gifts, that same Spirit also makes us one unified body in Jesus. May God bless us to find the best way to use our gifts and also to achieve real unity as the body of Christ. The message has two parts.

1. The same Spirit, different gifts (1-11)

Paul begins addressing the topic of spiritual gifts in Verse 1, saying *“Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.”* What is a “Gift of the Spirit” anyway? The name actually tells us a lot if we examine it. A gift is something that is simply given and received; it is not something deserved or earned. And “of the Spirit” tells us that the Holy Spirit plays an essential role in bestowing these gifts. The greatest gift is actually the Holy Spirit himself, coming to live in us. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Christ himself and is the power source for living a new life after we repent and come to Jesus. We should also remember that it was Jesus’ death for our sins that made it possible for us to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to his disciples John Chapter 16, the night before he died: *“But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”*

All believers receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. But “gifts of the Spirit” refers to the different types of inward spiritual gifts given to believers by the Holy Spirit, which express themselves in believers’ lives. One gift of the Holy Spirit was first manifested on the very day that the Holy Spirit was given, on Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit came down like tongues of fire on the apostles who were gathered in Jerusalem, each of them began to proclaim the gospel in languages that none of them had known before, and each member the crowd that had gathered could hear the gospel being proclaimed in their own native language. This was the first manifestation of the gift that we refer to as “speaking in tongues.” Peter, when he explained this event to the crowd, emphasized that this outpouring was from Jesus who had ascended to the right hand of God.

Some of the Corinthian church members had gone away from the gospel in their thinking about gifts; they became too preoccupied with showing off the gifts themselves, and lost sight of both who gave those gifts and what the gifts were to be used for. Look at verse 2. *“You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols.”* Paul reminds the Corinthian believers of their sinful past lives as idol worshipers. At that time, they worshiped in ignorance because the object of their worship was mute idols, who could not tell them anything. So idolatrous pagan worship often consisted of some wild flailing around or attempt to achieve trance-like states. But now that the Corinthians have come to the One God, they should not be led astray again by apparent displays of gifts that look impressive but don’t have any gospel content.

So Paul helps them put first things first. Look at verse 3. *“Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”* We don’t normally think of this as a spiritual gift, but Paul says the most important gift of the Spirit is to be able to confess Jesus as Lord. This is what someone without the Spirit can never do. Conversely, people who blaspheme Jesus don’t have the Holy Spirit, no matter what kind of other gifts they seem to have. Paul is leading the Corinthians (and us) to keep our focus not on the gifts but on the giver of all gifts, our Lord Jesus.

The Corinthian Christians’ desire to have gifts that others didn’t have and to show them off was one cause of the divisions that we have seen were afflicting the church. So Paul leads them back to the unity between all the gifts. Look at verse 4. *“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.”* Indeed, there are big differences in types of spiritual gifts, but the same Holy Spirit is behind all of them. Then Paul goes beyond gifts and shows how all aspects of the believer’s life come from God. Verses 5 and 6: *“There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”*

Notice how Paul has here referred to all three members of the Trinity: The Holy Spirit in verse 4, the Lord, which means Jesus Christ, and God, the Father. The Holy Spirit is related to gifts; the Lord Jesus is related to serving, because he came to serve us and now we serve him in everything we do; and God the Father is related to working, because in whatever we do, it is really God who is working in all things behind the scenes. Theologians say that the Holy Trinity, or three-in-one God, is the ultimate example of unity in diversity—that diversity is a part of God’s very essence, and yet of course God is a perfect unity as well. Paul is using the mystery of the Trinity to show how we can find unity in the diversity of all the various kinds of gifts and servings done in the church.

Next, to bring it back down to earth a little bit, Paul reminds the Corinthians of what spiritual gifts are to be used for. Verse 7: *“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”* This makes it clear that if God gives us a spiritual gift, the purpose is not that we may show it off but use it for the good of others. The “wow factor” of a gift is not even a consideration. In verses 8-10, Paul gives the first list of actual spiritual gifts. Let’s look at them: *“To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 10to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.”*

Later, Paul will describe other types of gifts, but this list has specifically supernatural gifts—things that cannot be a matter of human ability—and that can be visibly displayed in the assembly of God’s people. These were the kinds of gifts that the Corinthians were most interested in. Paul puts these gifts in a specific order, to show a kind of priority. The first gift in the list is the “message of wisdom,” that is, the ability to speak a message containing God’s wisdom. Please understand that this is not about human wisdom or speaking ability at all, but the previously hidden wisdom of God that is given in the gospel, which can lead people to salvation. Next is the message of knowledge, because knowledge is not as great as wisdom. These two gifts are ones that we specifically pray to be manifested in our fellowship through Bible teaching and preaching. Paul puts the gift of speaking in tongues near the bottom, probably because he doesn’t want the Corinthians to place too much emphasis on that gift. We will learn more about the gift of tongues in Chapter 14.

Regardless, nobody should become proud for having any of these gifts, because they are clearly not of human origin but are purely given by God. Look at verse 11. *“All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.”* Having different gifts does not make anybody better than anybody else, because all the gifts are from the same Holy Spirit. We did not even get to choose which gifts we got—the Holy Spirit himself decided who got which ones. So, let’s not worry about the gifts we don’t have or compare based on who has what gift; let’s just make up our minds to use our gifts for the common good.

1. The Body of Christ (12-31a)

To help the church understand more deeply how unity in diversity works, Paul introduces the metaphor of the body. Look at verses 12 and 13. *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”* The idea that the church is the body of Christ appears throughout the New Testament. Here Paul says that what makes us all one body is that we were all baptized by the one Spirit and nourished by that same Spirit. It might be like how all the parts of our body are nourished by the same blood flowing through all of it.

Verse 14 says, *“Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”* When you think about all the parts of the body, it is really amazing just how different they all are from each other in form and composition and function. And yet those very different parts work together to make one highly unified system, our body. The parts of the body work together so well that we typically only notice it when one part isn’t working well.

Since God made the members of the church different from each other just like the parts of the body are different from each other, we have no excuse for comparing ourselves with each other. Look at verse 15. *“Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.”* Comparing ourselves to each other is as silly as if a foot compared itself to a hand and began to feel bad about itself—maybe because its toes were not as long as a hand’s fingers. We know that a foot and a hand are different because they have different functions, both of which are vitally important to our life—the foot for balancing and walking, and the hand for grasping and manipulation. We don’t need a foot to be a hand, we need a foot to be a foot. It’s the same way with the differences between members in the church.

Similarly, *“if the ear should say, if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.* *If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?”* (16-17) This teaches me that how well we think we belong or fit in is not as important as the fact that God has already made us members of one body. God may need you where you are precisely because you are different from the norm.

We can trust God’s sovereignty in making us who we are and placing us where we are now. Verses 18 and 19 say, *“But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20As it is, there are many parts, but one body.”* So God needs us to be as different as he made us to be, and yet still part of one church as the body of Christ.

As body parts don’t need to feel bad because they are different from other body parts, body parts should also not judge each other or think other parts are less important because they don’t have the same abilities. Look at verse 21: *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’”* Spiritually, the “eye” might refer to those with more spiritual discernment, and the “hand” might be someone with more of a talent for serving. One of the most ingrained human tendencies is to use ourselves as the measuring stick—that is, when people have gifts similar to our own, we value them more highly, and when people have very different gifts, we value them less. But we are not the measuring stick. The measuring stick is how well each person fulfills the role they have in the church. It’s true that the eye doesn’t need the hand’s help to see, and the hand doesn’t need the eye’s help to grasp; but the body needs them both, and needs them to work together, so that it can see what needs to be grabbed and grasp it.

The analogy of the body also teaches us that those having apparently more humble roles in the church are indispensable. 22-24a: *“On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24while our presentable parts need no special treatment.”* Besides the work that they do, all parts of the body need to be taken care of in the way that is right for them; in the same way, members of the body of Christ have to take care of each other. In our Friday Bible study, it was mentioned that most people spend a lot of time taking care of their face, because it’s the part that everyone sees. But if you don’t take care of your other body parts, like your feet, you will soon realize that those parts are important also and need care.

Sometimes we may wonder why one person needs a certain kind of care and attention while others don’t. The explanation is simply that each person in the church is a different part of the body, and different body parts need different kinds of care. Verses 24b-25: *“But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.”* Everyone has needs of some kind. When we understand that God put the body together out of different people with different needs, we can accept each other and willingly serve each other according to their specific needs. That’s how we can achieve true equality, with every part knowing the importance of the other parts and being concerned in the right way for them. We can’t forget that even when a seemingly insignificant part of the body is hurting, it affects the whole body (26).

In the final paragraph of this passage, Paul goes back to the topic of gifts, and broadens it, speaking not just of supernatural spiritual gifts but of different roles and ways of serving in the church. Verse 28 says, *“And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.”* We cannot deny that some of these gifts seem more prestigious than the others. But in verse 29 Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions: *“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?”* These questions, all of which have the answer “no”, remind us that no matter what gift or role someone has, no one is everything. We need each other. Paul does tell us to desire the greater gifts (31). But the greater gifts are not the ones that get the most attention for the gifted person; the greatest gifts are those that do the most good for the body of Christ. As we will see in the next chapter, no gift can be used properly without love.

After reflecting on this passage, you may be asking yourself: “What is my gift?” It can be good to reflect to try to discern what our specific gifts are. But don’t misunderstand. It doesn’t mean that everyone has to decide right now what their gift is and then use only that gift and do nothing else. Actually, we only really find out what our gifts are after we try many different things. I never thought of myself as a messenger type; I thought my gift was to stay in a dark room by myself with computers. But I was given a chance to try my hand at delivering messages, and people seemed to find it useful enough that they let me keep doing it. So my advice is, don’t judge too prematurely what your gift is or isn’t, because you never know how God might want to use you. I would even say that we’re using our gifts the best when we’re not thinking about our gifts at all, but only about the common good. The worst tragedy would be if we let fear stop us from using our gifts, if we let them decay from lack of use.

Verse 27 is our key verse and summarizes the entire passage: *“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”* We can use our gifts rightly when we know that they are given by the Holy Spirit for the good of the whole body of Christ. We can accept ourselves and others when we understand that bodies need parts that work in very different ways. May God bless us to use our gifts well and see the body of Christ become strong and healthy in our time.