

One Body, Many Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Mark Vroegop

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 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.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:12–27).

As you’ve heard throughout the worship service today, we are taking the first Sunday in June to express our gratitude to the 1,000+ people who serve and use their God-given gifts every Sunday morning. Without their generosity of time and talent, the kind of ministry that happens week after week at our church would simply not happen.

Let me state it another way for you: While there are many thriving ministries connected to our church that happen throughout the week, our Sunday Ministries serve more people than anything else that we do. Over the last year, we’ve witnessed lives being changed, people coming to faith in Christ, believers taking steps in discipleship, and a week-by-week spiritual growth that is directly connected to our Sunday Ministries.

A few weeks ago, following one of the messages on John 3, a young man approached me after the service. He was clearly emotionally moved and shared with me that today was the day that he had become a Christian. He sensed God drawing him. He had repented of his sins and put his trust in Jesus for the first time. I was able to see the clear fruit of the work of the Spirit in his life. And he was responding to what he had heard in the sermon that day. But there were a host of people who

ministered to him, including members of his own family. Every person involved in his life and every person with whom he had come in contact shared in the fruit of his decision to trust in Christ as his Savior and Lord.

Therefore, while weekday ministry leaders at College Park will find a way to express their gratitude, we wanted to be sure that today we say a hearty “Thank You” to those who serve in Children and Student Ministries, Worship Arts and Production Ministries, Hospitality and Guest Services, Safety and Facilities, Adult Big Groups, Special Needs Ministry, Prayer Ministry, Finance and Counting Team, and our Compassion Team. We have a special gift for each of you who have served in these areas in the last year. And we just want to tell you how thankful we are for you because you make Sundays happen.

With this level of focus, I thought it would be a good time to not only say, “Thank you,” but also to remind us about the theological and spiritual vision for how we use our gifts. I want to show you how the Bible calls us to be the body of Christ through the use of many gifts. We are one body with many gifts.

Background of 1 Corinthians 12

The Apostle Paul had an interesting relationship with the church in Corinth, which is in modern-day Greece. It was a talented church with many gifts. But the church also had many problems, especially as it related to church unity.

The church members were prone to quarreling and divisiveness. In chapter one, they were dividing themselves into spiritual camps, with one group identifying with Paul, others with Peter, some with Apollos, and still others with Christ (1:12). Paul viewed this party-mindset not as an expression of their maturity, but rather of their immaturity.

Mark it down: Anyone can be divisive. It’s not hard to do. Just get passionate about something. Get good at what you do. Then think everyone is missing out if they aren’t part of your thing. And you’re there.

But their divisive spirit didn’t stop there. It affected how they viewed the expression of spiritual gifts. In case you are not familiar with the term “spiritual gifts,” it simply means “any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in the ministry of the church.”¹ This definition could include natural talents under the control of the Holy Spirit or unique abilities given after a person becomes a Christian.

In Corinth, the problem seems to be that some were placing an inappropriate emphasis on the upfront, more dramatic and supernatural gifts that characterized the early church. This church needed a reminder about the theological principles underneath their spiritual gifts. Here’s what Paul said:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:4–7).

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1016.

Paul desires for them (and us) to see how spiritual gifts are designed to create unity. And to make that point very clear, verses 12-27 help us see how we should think about the gifts, talents, and abilities that we have.

This text identifies the principle, dangers, and goal of our spiritual gifts. Let's look at each of these.

The Principle

In order to bring some balance to the conversation about spiritual gifts, Paul establishes a fundamental principle that we need to understand. It is found in verse 12:

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12).

Now, this point is going to become even more clear as we walk through other verses. But this principle is really important to get into our thinking. In whatever way the Spirit has gifted people individually, it is part of a bigger picture reality. Spiritual gifts are given individually, but they are designed to benefit the entire body of Christ.

So, the principle—positively stated—is that we contribute to something bigger than ourselves. We contribute to the makeup of the "body of Christ." In other words, there is one body with many members. Let me put it in a more pointed manner: Your gifts and your ministry are not just about you.

To make this clear, Paul uses the metaphor of the physical body. In the same way that there are various parts of the body which work together, the church needs the individual members to understand their connection to the whole. This is vitally important. You have to know your role and your connection to the whole.

If you've ever served on a team, you know how important this is. If you are a golfer, this is not individual play to lower your handicap. This is the Ryder Cup. If you are a basketball player, it is knowing your part in the play, not just working on your individual stats. If you are a part of a business unit, it is wanting to manage the project well together, not just to be noticed by your superiors. If you are a child who lives at home, it means understanding that socks don't get picked up by themselves.

The challenge is that human beings, especially in Western Cultures, tend toward a focus on the individual. Our bias is to think about ourselves first and neglect the implications for other people. This is a mark of immaturity. And it was the issue in Corinth.

But it's not just the connection to the whole. There's something more here. When Paul talks this way about "the body," he connects it directly to Christ himself and to the Church. Jesus takes the treatment and the health of the Church personally. When Jesus confronted Paul about his persecution before he was converted, he said: "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4) And after Paul's conversion, he reflected on the mystery of the Church in Ephesians 3. Here's what he said:

“To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:8–10).

A unified, multi-faceted church says something really powerful to the world and even, according to this text in Ephesians, the spiritual realm as well. There’s something otherworldly about the body of Christ—the Church.

The Holy Spirit is involved as well. In verse 13 Paul makes that point clearly when he talks about how all Christians are placed into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. That’s what it means when he says, “all baptized into one body.” When you become a Christian, you are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit as everyone else. To drive that point home, Paul emphasizes the equality between two cultural categories: Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free.

The Holy Spirit baptizes all of them into the body of Christ equally. So, the Church is comprised of people from different backgrounds, giftings, and ethnicities to say something powerful to the world. The Church is a place of equality and oneness because of our relationship with Christ and our mutual empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, as you come to church and as you use the gifts God has given you, here are three things to remind yourself:

1. I’m part of something bigger and more important than myself: the Church
2. I’m helping reflect something more beautiful than I can imagine: Jesus
3. Everything I do is empowered by something outside of me: the Holy Spirit

Understanding this is critical so that you don’t fall into two common pitfalls or dangers.

Two Dangers

There are two ditches on either side of this “one body, many members” principle. Paul is going to help us understand them, but first, he reiterates the principle in verse 14—“For the body does not consist of one member but of many.” You can’t reduce the body to merely one member.

What are the two dangers? Under and overvaluing giftedness. Both are mistakes because of comparison.

1. Under-valuing Giftedness

In verses 15-16, Paul uses the body metaphor and gives particular body parts a voice. He imagines the foot saying that it is not worthwhile because it is not a hand. Or the ear saying that because it is not an eye, it does not belong to the body. It’s interesting to note the closeness of comparison: foot to hand, ear to eye. John Chrysostom (349-407), an early Church Father, said that this was important because we

tend to envy those who surpass us by a little more than those who are patently in a different class.² We can underestimate the gifts that we've been given and become covetous of the gifts of others.

Sometimes this happens because of pride. We want to be something we are not. Other times this happens because of immaturity. We fail to see the bigger picture. And at other times, this can happen because of unfair or unkind treatment. We don't see the value of our gifting because we've been told that we are inferior or that our gifts are not as important.

You could imagine that some Gentiles and some slaves felt this way. I would imagine there are some in our church who have felt that way in the past. They feel inferior because they don't come from "the right group," "the right school," or "the right background." And sometimes this inferiority can lead to a conclusion that I don't belong in the church at all (v. 16).

Paul wants to push hard against this mindset. He asks the church to imagine what it would be like if the church were all eyes: Where would the sense of hearing be? Of if the church were all ears, where would be the sense of smell? It's a ridiculous image. Paul designed it to be that way.

Instead of under-valuing our giftedness and falling into the trap of comparison, we should realize not only the wisdom of the diversity of gifts, but also the sovereignty of God at work. Verse 18 explicitly says that God arranged the members in the body *each one of them as he chose*.

This perspective infuses divine intentionality into the gifting of each and every one of us. God has orchestrated your personality, your talents, and your abilities. He didn't make a mistake in how he made you, the way you think, and what you are good at.

Be careful that you don't sideline your giftedness out of comparison ("I could never do it as well as they do") or insecurity ("I'm not like _____, so I shouldn't get involved"). Be careful not to fall into the undervaluing ditch.

But there's another ditch.

2. Over-valuing Giftedness

Next, we find another, all-too-common ditch that is rooted in pride and self-focus. In verse 21, Paul supposes that the eye says to the hand, "I have no need of you." Or suppose the head says to the feet, "I have no need of you."

Take note of Paul's wording: "I have no need of you." It's not that he imagines the eye not acknowledging the hand's presence. It's just that the eye doesn't see the hand as useful or necessary. "I have no need of you."

² Leon Morris, [*1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 169.

Here's how it happens. The eye becomes enamored with seeing. It loves what it can see, how it can see, and what can be learned by seeing. In its passion for seeing, it begins to believe that all of life exists in "seeing things." And this singular focus causes it to believe that it really can make it all by itself. Or it begins to consider other areas of the body as less important.

Surely, you've seen this happen. And you know what I've found over the years? No one sets out to overvalue their giftedness or their ministry area. They just become so passionate about the value that they are adding and the benefit that they are to the body, that they begin to think other areas are just not needed. When this happens, they fail to realize the interconnectedness of the entire body.

Some commentators think Paul is playing off a familiar fable from the first century attributed to Menenius Agrippa:

The members of the Body once rebelled against the Belly, who, they said, led an idle, lazy life at their expense. The Hands declared that they would not again lift a crust even to keep him from starving, the Mouth that it would not take in a bit more food, the Legs that they would carry him about no longer, and so on with the others. The Belly quietly allowed them to follow their own courses, well knowing that they would all soon come to their senses, as indeed they did, when, for want of the blood and nourishment supplied from the stomach, they found themselves fast becoming mere skin and bone.³

You get the point. But I think it's helpful to hear from William Barclay (1907-1978) who said, "Whenever we begin to think about our own importance in the Christian Church, the possibility of really Christian work is gone."⁴

So, when it comes to the giftedness of the body, we have two dangers. Be careful that you don't undervalue the gifts God has given to you. Don't allow your heart to fall into covetousness of other people's gifts. And don't sideline your giftedness because of a misplaced inferiority complex. Additionally, if your gifting is more public, in the spotlight, and highly affirmed, be sure it doesn't become intoxicating. Watch out when your gifting becomes your identity, and when you become territorial or possessive.

Watch out for the ditches of under and overvaluing giftedness.

The Goal

Finally, what is the target that Paul is aiming for? He wants the church at Corinth, and he wants our church, to remember the divinely-designed interdependence of the body. While we are different members with different gifts, we are all part of the same body, and we need one another.

A few places we see this emerge:

³ <https://fablesdfaesop.com/the-belly-and-the-members.html>

⁴ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 170.

- v 22: we are told that the weaker parts are indispensable
- v 23: we treat more private parts with greater honor by clothing them (e.g. how many pairs of shoes vs. pairs of gloves)
- v 24: God values every part of the body, infusing everything with divine purpose
- v 25: God's aim is to see the body care for itself through this unity in diversity
- v 26: the result should be that the body of Christ is so united that we share in one another's joys and sorrows.

Do you see Paul's beautiful vision? He envisions a church—bought by Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, filled with unity, and using its gifts such that the members know something bigger than themselves is at work. That's what he says in verse 27:

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27).

So, let me encourage every one of you. Every single believer has been uniquely gifted by God through the Spirit. We share in the spoils of Jesus's victory. And one way that we express our affection for Jesus and our fidelity to gospel is by using our gifts—not for our glory, but for the benefit of others, as we live out what it means to be the body of Christ.

As we serve each other, and with each other, we demonstrate to the world the power and glorious nature of Jesus.

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