

THE FOCUS OF TODAY'S LESSON: Spiritual growth calls for regular interaction with and ministry to other believers.

CONNECTION TO LIFE: Our world today seems to be drawn to those people who are talented or skilled with unique abilities or qualities. The more talent a person has, the more popular that person may be. But a multi-talented person does not necessarily make the world a better place. Our God has a different focus. He wants us to serve and support others. He gives us what we need to meet His purpose. Our study today in 1st Corinthians will show us that we are each given gifts for ministering and meeting God's purposes.

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY 1 Corinthians 12: 12-24 (from The Message)

12-13 You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

14-18 I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, transparent and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

19-24 But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?

Paul had a rocky relationship with the Corinthian church. He had spent 1 ½ years ministering there on his second missionary journey. But Paul had received information while in Ephesus that there was now severe disunity in the church. There were splits in issues regarding the Lord's Supper and great controversy about spiritual gifts. The Corinthian members were saying that some gifts were greater than others and treating fellow members with disrespect. So, this letter was written to address the issues and "set them straight"!

Paul noted that the variety of gifts given to believers all come from the same God and are given for the common good. The very same Holy Spirit is the giver of all the gifts, and He alone determines which believers get which gifts. The theme of "oneness" is emphasized over and over by Paul. He used obvious examples to make his point. Just as each human body is made up of many parts, so is the body of the church. All means all! All believers are part of the body of Christ and the church. Yes, there is diversity (Jews/Greeks and slaves/free). But no matter what had separated them in the past, they were now to live as one.

God has given each of us believers a role and responsibility within the body of Christ to live out in our daily lives. The body of believers is made up of Christians who have a variety of spiritual gifts, just as the human body's parts work together. But there was an abuse of spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth, and it was causing disunity. Some were envious of those with seemingly greater gifts, while individuals blessed with those gifts felt superior to their fellow believers, and they let them know it! Those who felt inferior thought that they were not really a true part of the body, and the superior ones reinforced that false belief. Paul told the Corinthians that every believer provides a unique, important contribution or service to the body. The overall point is to serve where you are. God created the physical body and arranged the parts. We didn't do that. And we did not invent the body of believers. God did that too, and He gave each member a job to do. It takes all of the members of the church with their diverse spiritual gifts for the church to function effectively, harmoniously, and as God intended. To take issue with who has or does not have certain spiritual gifts within the body of Christ is to question the wisdom and purposes of God. Similarly, Paul challenged the Corinthians' arrogance in favoring one church leader over another. They were splitting the church into factions and aligning themselves with certain leaders and looking down on others. God was demonstrating His power through these leaders in different ways to spread the gospel and build up His church. God is pleased to use both the weak and the strong, so that by working through the weakness of people He can glorify Himself. Paul emphasized the importance of unity within the church to show mutual respect and concern for one another. He also stressed that there is an interconnectedness that characterizes the body of Christ.

Paul's words are as true for us today as they were in the first century. The church is made up of individual members, and God designed the church to function as one united body. We are given individual roles and responsibilities within that body, and EVERY Christian is a necessary part of the whole. The world may lift up a few who are especially talented and excel in their fields, whether entertainment, music, sports, and so forth, but God has a different focus. He values every person, and He wants the church body to serve and support one another in fulfilling the great commission of proclaiming the gospel to a lost world. He has equipped us for that very purpose. We must grow in our relationship with God, seek to discover our individual gifts and talents He has blessed us with and use them for the betterment of the church body to glorify Him.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO DISCOVER WHAT PART YOU CAN PLAY IN THE CHURCH!

PRAY: Father, thank You for the church. Help us to function together as a unified body so that we can do Your work. Help us to honor and respect the gifts and talents of others, while always seeking to use the gifts You have given to us. Amen.

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