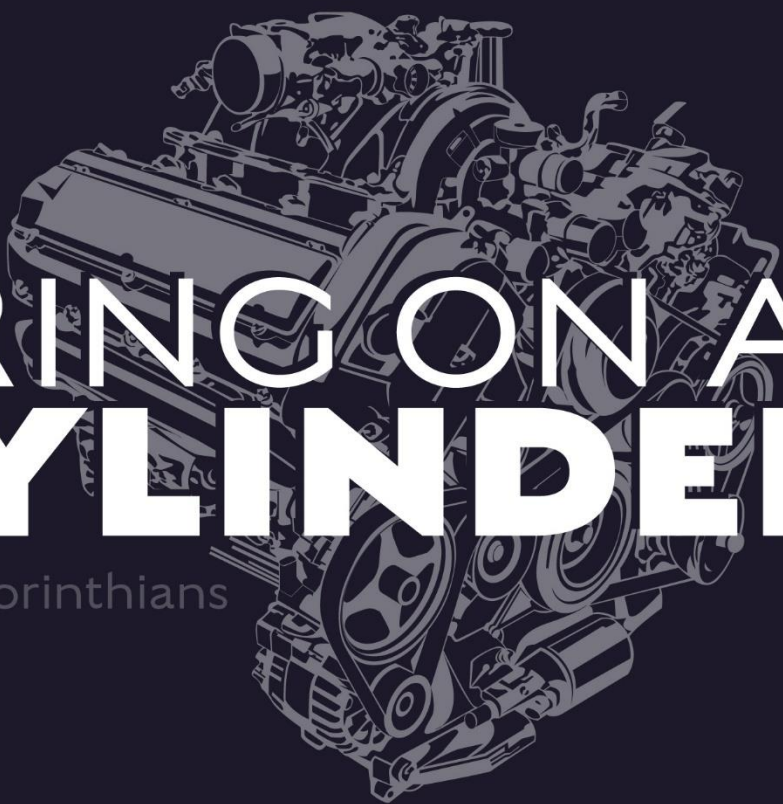




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FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

I Corinthians

SMALL GROUP LESSONS

PACKET 6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LESSON 20 | You’re Wearing That?.....2

LESSON 21 | Communion: When a Meal Becomes an Event!11

LESSON 22 | Use Your Gifts! 18

LESSON 23 | Unity & Diversity24

LESSON 24 | Endless Love32



You're Wearing That?

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

What do you do when you don't have any idea what is going on? When the situation you are facing is tricky at best, when the passage you are reading is confusing not just in one place but several, when "it's complicated" is the legitimate answer to explaining the relationship with someone you love? What do you do when it just feels weird?

We like things to be neat and tidy, to be clear. We would prefer that the things we believe to be straightforward, normal, and not filled with tension. And yet we all face times, places, situations and people that are anything but tidy, when all of our assumed categories no longer seem to fit and yet we still have to move forward. We may be able to ignore the weirdness and the uncertainty for a time, but sooner or later it is going to come home to roost.

That is exactly where we find ourselves as we come to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, a passage that one commentator called "the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament."¹ And like many of the confusing situations we face, it is over something seemingly small that becomes the springboard for all kinds of things that are probably not even in view. The issue: head coverings in church, specifically women wearing head coverings in church. Such a small thing, but one which has had profound implications for dress, participation in church and relationships among men and women (often erroneously) not just in the recent past, not just for centuries, but literally millennia.

BREAK THE ICE

"What is a hairstyle or fashion choice you had that now makes you cringe?"

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *The NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY 1 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 214.

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

EXPLORE IT

1. What issue does Paul bring up in v.2?
2. What is the presenting issue of the passage?
3. To what does Paul appeal as the base of his argument (vv. 7-9)?
4. What truth does Paul remind the Corinthians of (vv. 11-12)?

APPLY IT

It feels more than a little ironic that a passage that has caused no small amount of contention inside (and outside!) the church ends with Paul saying *“If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.”* It's almost as if Paul knows that this one is going to touch a nerve and battle lines are going to be drawn. It doesn't help that the language he uses here is ambiguous on several levels. Andrew Wilson offers a good summary of the difficulties in this passage:

The presenting issue in the first half of this chapter is head coverings, and what is appropriate for men and women in the context of Christian worship. It is a fiendishly difficult passage. Scholars continue to debate all kinds of issues that arise here, and five in particular are worth mentioning. One: We cannot be certain whether Paul is referring to wearing a covering over one's head, like a hood or a veil, or whether he is talking about the way people wear their hair. Two: We cannot be certain why he is concerned about it. Three: Much of Paul's argument is built on a wordplay around the word “head” (kephale), but there is disagreement on what the wordplay actually means. Four: The section contains a couple of theological curveballs that would be challenging in any passage, like “the head of Christ is God” (11:3), or “woman is the glory of man” (v 7), or “because of the angels” (v 10). Five: The relations between men and women are enormously controversial in our generation, and therefore any passage that addresses the subject so directly is bound to divide opinion. . . . And that is all without mentioning a sixth issue, which is probably most pressing for Christian readers: whatever Paul is saying, what on earth do we do about it?²

No small challenge for us then.

5. How do you tend to approach passages that are difficult to understand or may be controversial?

6. Which of the above issues stands out to you and why?

² Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, (The Good Book Company, 2023), 117–118.

So what do we do when we come to passages like this, ones that are difficult and which have led good and faithful people to very different conclusions? (To say nothing of the cultural difficulties they are bound to cause). Before we can tackle the specifics of a passage like this, we need to do a check on our posture and approach to the passage in question and to the Scriptures more generally. The following list, while not exhaustive, is a good starting place for us all:

- Begin prayerfully, asking God to show us himself and to reveal what he would have us to understand.
- Read the passage carefully, making sure we are paying attention to what is (and isn't) there. A helpful practice in difficult passages is to look at several translations side by side to see how they are the same and different. (www.biblegateway.com has a good parallel function which makes this easy without having to purchase any editions). Reading carefully also includes remembering what came before, and after a given passage (immediate context), recognizing the type of literature (genre), and looking into why the book was written and to whom. (A number of good study Bibles are available in the ESV, CSB, NIV and NLT that do a good job of helping in these areas. You don't have to buy lots of commentaries—but they can be helpful too.)
- Ask yourself if the passage is truly confusing or if you really don't like what you are reading and *want* it to be unclear.
- Identify the things that are clear in the passage as a starting point and work from there. It may be helpful to make a list of things that are clear and things that aren't. This can help us to see if the confusing parts change the core message of the passage or not.
- Remember that Scripture interprets Scripture. In other words, how does the rest of the Bible talk about the topic at hand? We go to the clearer Scriptures to help us understand the more difficult ones. Since we believe that Scripture is written by men but *from* God, we can expect differences in style or approach, but a consistent message overall even if the passage in question deals with a very specific issue (like head coverings in worship).

As mentioned, this list is not exhaustive, but it should help the process of studying difficult passages. In the case of our passage, try several of these points before answering the next questions.

7. What aspects of this passage do you find confusing (if any)? Did any of the points above help clarify things or at least to identify where the issues lie?

8. What did you identify as the things we can be sure of?

9. Do the things that are clear help you in deciphering the things that aren't?

In the case of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, some things are clear, but the things that are opaque can make it hard to understand what to do with the passage as a whole. Should we go back to wearing hats in church for women? Should we have a barber available after (or perhaps before) the service for men? What is the deal with angels? And what is all this about headship and authority?

The first issue that must be addressed is the most controversial in our time—headship. What does it mean that Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ (v.3)? This needs to come before the issue of head coverings or hair not just because it comes first in the passage but because it is foundational to understanding what Paul is up to.

10. What is your gut level reaction to the idea of what you think “headship” means?

There are two basic schools of thought about the word headship. The first is that it means authority or sovereignty. In effect “ruler”. The second view is that it means source, as in the source of a river. Both positions have fairly strong grounds and the second has gained popularity in recent years, not least because the idea of headship as authority strikes us moderns as backwards and repressive. We don’t like the idea (or perhaps some *really* do, but for all the wrong reasons). But both of these perspectives have a problem, they isolate a single, modern meaning that might not square with the ancient world. Wilson explains:

To most of us, the “head” is simply the one in charge. The head of a school or a department, or the armed forces is the boss. . . . So when we see Paul saying that the “head” of the woman is man—or that the “head” of Christ is God—we read it through the lens of command and authority, whether or not that is what Paul meant.

Here, as it happens, that reading is partially right. The relationships between husbands and wives in Corinth, and between God and Jesus during his incarnation, did involve some measure of authority, as most scholars agree. But the heart of Paul’s picture is not command and control, like in a Western organization. It is honor and shame, like in an Eastern family. The “head” is not primarily the one in charge, or even the origin or source of everything else (although he is usually both); the “head” is the prominent, uppermost, supreme or pre-eminent one, the one whose reputation is either honored or shamed by the actions of others.³

When we see this passage through the lens of honor and shame several things come into clearer view. While cases can be made for either authority or source, both need to be placed within the context of the culture of first century Roman Corinth, not our own. The entire passage hangs on the idea of bringing honor, not shame to one another and ultimately to God. When we do inappropriate things, we do not simply shame ourselves but the one whom we represent. In the case of this passage, the issue is proper behavior and attire in a worship setting. Notice that verses 4 and 5 are in the same public worship setting and that both men and women are participating on some level.

11. How does understanding the background of honor and shame help you to understand this passage?

12. Given the issues that we have seen Paul deal with throughout 1 Corinthians, what do you think this says about our attitudes relating to self, others, and ultimately to Christ and the Father?

³ IBID, 119.

The second tricky issue is whether or not Paul is speaking of hair or head coverings in this passage. The Greek is ambiguous and strong arguments for both are possible. Many argue that married women in this time would not have gone into public without a hair covering, perhaps a veil or a shawl. Others argue that art from the time including statues and mosaics, show women unveiled but with their hair done up on top of the head, not hanging loose. In either case the woman is signifying her marital status and not to do so would be to indicate availability or promiscuity (an issue we have seen repeatedly in Corinth). Paul's reference to shaving a woman's head in vv.5-6 refers to a known punishment by husbands for adultery by their wives. So a woman wearing her hair down would likely imply sexual sin. Further, many of the mystery cults of gods like Dionysus and Cybele which were quite popular among women in this time period encouraged women to loosen their hair and try to enter an ecstatic state. Paul would certainly not have wanted any connection to these cults to be brought into Christian worship (as we have already seen in ch.10).

Culturally the case for women covering or putting up their hair is fairly straightforward even with the ambiguity of Paul's language. But what about men? Paul seems to speak of a covering in verse 4 and of long hair in verse 14. It is possible that both are in view. Among the Greeks and Romans of the time, long hair on a man was taken as a sign of effeminacy (virtually all statues of the period are of men with short hair except for war captives who are intended to look weak). Additionally, there is some evidence that when men participated in worship at the pagan temples, especially if they took on a ceremonial role, they covered their heads.

NT Wright offers a valuable insight into the implications of the head covering issue:

The underlying point then seems to be that in worship it is important for both men and women to be their truly created selves, to honour God by being what they are and not blurring lines by pretending to be something else. . . . the critical move he [Paul] makes is to argue that a man dishonours his head by covering it in worship and that a woman dishonours hers by *not* covering it. He argues this mainly from the basis that creation itself tends to give men shorter hair and women longer (verses 5-6, 13-15); the fact that some cultures, and some people, offer apparent exceptions would probably not have worried him. His main point is that in worship men should follow dress and hair codes which proclaim them to be male, and women the codes which proclaim them to be female.⁴

Paul makes it clear that he is not saying that women are inferior to men in verses 11-12 when he follows his argument from creation order with an argument for our interdependence—the first woman came from a man but every man since has come from a woman. We are not independent.

The strangeness of v. 10: “symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels” is difficult, but probably means a wife shows honor to her husband by making the choice to cover her head when participating publicly in worship with other men. Because she does so appropriately, she can't be disregarded in her participation. But what of the angels? William Baker explains:

Interpreters have offered numerous approaches to explain this reference, but for the most part they have settled on one, suggested long ago by Augustine: Paul must have thought of angels as being fellow participants in worship. In Qumran [the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls] angels were said to be “among the congregation” (1QS*a* 2:8-9; 1QM 7:4-6). In Revelation 7:11-12 thousands of angels gather around the throne and worship the slain lamb. In Hebrews 1:1-14 angels worship God Christ their Lord and are said to be servants “sent to care for people who will inherit Salvation.”⁵

Wright adds, that for the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community

“This means that the angels, being holy, must not be offended by any appearance of unholiness among the congregation. Paul shares the assumption that the angels are worshipping along with the humans, but may be making a different point.

When humans are renewed in the Messiah and raised from the dead, they will be set in authority over the angels (6:3). In worship, the church anticipates how things are going to be in that new day. When a woman is praying or prophesying...she needs to be truly what she is, since it is to male and female alike, in their mutual interdependence as God's image-bearing creatures, that the world including the angels is to be subject.⁶

⁴ NT Wright, *1 Corinthians for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 97.

⁵ William Baker, *1 Corinthians in Cornerstone Biblical Commentary Volume 15*, (Carol Stream, Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 163.

⁶ Wright, 97.

13. Given the fact that the specific situations regarding pagan worship and appropriate sexual behavior are no longer reflected (as much anyway) in our hairstyles, how do you think this passage should be applied today?
14. How does the idea of honor and dishonor in both our relationships as human beings, especially husband and wife in relation to those around us, and in our relationship to Christ change the way that you view this passage?
15. How does the idea that the angels both participate in our worship and are concerned that we worship appropriately impact your view of worship and our role in it?

16. How does Paul's emphasis on appropriate gender roles, not as an issue of superiority and inferiority, but of ultimately bringing honor to the God who created us, speak to today's culture which is so confused about issues of gender?



Communion: When a Meal Becomes an Event!

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

When I think about communion, I'm reminded of what it's like to cater an event. Catering isn't just about the food—it's about creating a space where something meaningful can happen. Whether it's a wedding, a celebration, or a family gathering, the food sets the stage for deeper connection and shared experiences. It's more than just grilling pork chops or chicken—it's about creating an atmosphere that invites people into something greater.

Communion is the ultimate “catered” meal, but in *1 Corinthians 11*, the Corinthians had lost sight of what it was meant to be. Instead of using this meal to honor Jesus and deepen their unity as believers, they were letting division and selfishness take over. Some were feasting and drinking to excess, while others—likely the poorer members—were left with nothing. Paul doesn't hold back in his correction: “Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?” (v. 22).

Paul's rebuke reminds us that communion isn't just about us as individuals; it's about the community of believers. The Corinthians were approaching the Lord's Supper as if it were just another meal to fill their stomachs, but Paul reminds them—and us—that it's much more. Communion is a sacred moment where we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again. It's not just about remembering Jesus' sacrifice—it's about living in light of it. That means showing the same love, grace, and humility to one another that Jesus showed to us.

Think about it: when you're preparing an event, every detail matters because you're creating an environment where relationships can flourish. Communion does the same thing. It creates a space where we can come together as the body of Christ, unified by His love and sacrifice. But just like the Corinthians, we can get distracted. Maybe we come to the table harboring grudges or focused on our own concerns. Maybe we're not thinking about the people around us or the profound grace Jesus offers through this meal. Paul challenges us to examine our hearts before we take communion (v. 28) so that we can approach the table with humility and gratitude.

Communion is also a moment to reset. Life gets messy, and relationships can strain. But when we come to the Lord's Table, we're reminded that Jesus' sacrifice didn't just reconcile us to God—it reconciles us to each other. It's a powerful opportunity to let go of bitterness, division, and pride and embrace the unity we share in Christ. The Corinthians were focused on themselves, but Paul calls them—and us—back to the heart of this meal: Jesus, who gave everything to bring us into fellowship with Him and with one another.

So, next time you come to the Lord's Table, slow down and reflect. This meal isn't just bread and grape juice. It's a sacred space where Jesus meets us, nourishes us, and unites us. It's a chance to proclaim His love, embrace His grace, and be reminded of the community He's called us to. Let this meal challenge you to approach others with the same love and humility that Jesus has shown you.

BREAK THE ICE

Describe your favorite dining experience. What made it special (food, setting, occasion, people)?

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

EXPLORE IT

1. What severe problem did Paul address in this passage?
2. What is accomplished by eating the bread and drinking the wine?
3. What is the result of partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner?
4. What did the illness and death suffered by the Corinthians reveal about God's attitude toward communion?
5. What advice and instructions did Paul give to Christians preparing for communion?

APPLY IT

This is one of the only places in the Bible where we read that God's people gathering together was "not for the better but for the worse" (1 Corinthians 11:17). That should give us a clue that something seriously dysfunctional and wrong was taking place in the church as they assembled. Paul hints at two sides to the same problem and each is called out by the words "when you come together." The first aspect and the bigger issue is general disunity and factions and the second aspect is the practical concern with how they were administering communion. It appears that the division expressed in communion was also related to those who were well off and those who were poor because the poor were being "humiliated" (1 Corinthians 11:22). The particular issue around the Lord's Supper is that a group who would gather ahead of time and take their fill of the bread and the wine and leave out others in the church. Instead of building up one another the church was fractured and selfish.⁷

- 6. Thinking of a time when you were invited to an event or activity that was designed to draw everyone closer and the opposite happened, what caused this to take place?**

- 7. Paul uses strong language to describe the negative impact of the Corinthians' gatherings. What are some ways modern churches might unintentionally gather "for the worse"? How can we ensure our gatherings build up the body of Christ?**

Of course, the divisions at the dinner were but evidence of the deeper problems in the church. The Corinthians thought they were advanced believers, when in reality they were but little children. Paul did not suggest that they abandon the feast, but rather that they restore its proper meaning.⁸

- 8. Considering contemporary examples of divisions or factions that can arise in the church, how do we go about addressing these particular issues to promote unity within the body of Christ?**

⁷ <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/06/1-corinthians-11-17-34-study-guide-the-lord-s-supper>

⁸ Be Wise (1 Corinthians): Discern the Difference Between Man's Knowledge and God's Wisdom by Warren Wiersbe

The Corinthians were operating in self-deception when they came together to observe this sacred communal meal. In reality, when they gathered it was “not to eat the Lord’s Supper” at all (v. 20). What is the apostle’s evidence? “For at the meal, each one eats his own supper” (v. 21). Their self-focus meant “one person is hungry while another gets drunk!” (v. 21). The Corinthians were guilty of letting their rich take precedence over their poor and of gluttony. Perhaps being influenced by the pagan festivals they once indulged in, the wealthy gorged themselves. All the while the poor (many of whom were probably slaves) went hungry, receiving little or nothing to eat and drink because it was soon gone. Wiersbe is almost certainly correct: It is likely that the weekly agape feast was the only decent meal some of the poorer members regularly had; and to be treated so scornfully by the richer members not only hurt their stomachs, but also their pride. (Be Wise, 115) Paul is outraged by such selfish and sinful behavior and delivers a stern rebuke in verse 22: “Don’t you have homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”⁹

9. **Paul rebukes the Corinthians because their self-centeredness turned the Lord’s Supper into a selfish feast rather than a sacred communal meal. What are some ways a focus on self might distort our own worship practices or attitudes today?**

10. **Paul addresses how money can create divisions among God’s people, highlighting the way economic status can lead to favoritism and inequality within the church. Why does money so often divide us, and how can we guard against falling into the same trap today?**

⁹ Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) Dr. Daniel L. Akin and James Merritt

Evangelical churches recognize two ordinances established by Jesus Christ for His people to observe: baptism and the Lord's Supper. (The Supper is also called the Communion, as in 1 Corinthians 10:16, and the Eucharist, which means "the giving of thanks.") Jesus Christ took the cup and the loaf—the ingredients of a common meal on that day—and transformed them into a meaningful spiritual experience for believers.

- 11. How do Baptism and Communion complement each other in proclaiming the Lord's salvation, and why might Baptism be an important first step before participating in the ongoing practice of Communion?**

- 12. How does knowing the different names given to this event help us to understand the fullness of this momentous occasion?**

The Lord's Supper gives us an opportunity for spiritual growth and blessings if we approach it in the right attitude. What, then, must we do if the Supper is to bring blessing and not chastening? Warren Wiersbe reminds us of three truths¹⁰:

First, we should look back (vv. 23–26a). The broken bread reminds us of Christ's body, given for us; and the cup reminds us of His shed blood. It is a remarkable thing that Jesus wants His followers to remember His death...However, this "remembering" is not simply the recalling of historical facts. It is a participation in spiritual realities. At the Lord's Table, we do not walk around a monument and admire it. We have fellowship with a living Savior as our hearts reach out by faith.

13. When you partake in Communion, what does it mean to you to "remember" His death as more than just recalling facts but participating in the spiritual reality of His love and grace?

Second, we should look ahead (v. 26b). We observe the Supper "till he comes." The return of Jesus Christ is the blessed hope of the church and the individual Christian. Jesus not only died for us, but He arose again and ascended to heaven; and one day He shall return to take us to heaven. Today, we are not all that we should be; but when we see Him, "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2).

14. How does the hope and anticipation of Christ's return shape the way you approach Communion and your daily faith journey?

¹⁰ Be Wise (1 Corinthians): Discern the Difference Between Man's Knowledge and God's Wisdom by Warren Wiersbe

Third, we should look within (vv. 27–28, 31–32). Paul did not say that we had to be worthy to partake of the Supper, but only that we should partake in a worthy manner. At a Communion service in Scotland, the pastor noted that a woman in the congregation did not accept the bread and cup from the elder, but instead sat weeping. The pastor left the table and went to her side and said, “Take it, my dear, it’s for sinners!” And, indeed, it is; but sinners saved by God’s grace must not treat the Supper in a sinful manner.

15. What does it mean to partake in Communion “in a worthy manner”?

16. How can self-examination and repentance deepen your experience of the Lord’s Supper?

Finally, we should look around (vv. 33–34). We should not look around in order to criticize other believers, but in order to discern the Lord’s body (1 Cor. 11:29). This perhaps has a dual meaning: We should discern His body in the loaf, but also in the church around us—for the church is the body of Christ. “For we being many are one bread, and one body” (1 Cor. 10:17). The Supper should be a demonstration of the unity of the church—but there was not much unity in the Corinthian church. In fact, their celebration of the Lord’s Supper was only a demonstration of their disunity.

17. Paul challenges the Corinthians to discern the Lord’s body both in the bread and in the church. How can we become more aware of Christ’s presence in the church around us? What steps can we take to engage in a deeper sense of unity and love within our church community during Communion?

18. As we consider the rich dimensions of the Lord’s Supper—looking back at Christ’s sacrifice, looking ahead to His return, looking within ourselves for repentance and renewal, and looking around to embrace unity in the body of Christ, let us ask:

- **Where do you feel strongest in your approach, and where might you need to grow?**

- **What encouragement or instruction can you learn from others in our small group to help you approach Communion more intentionally and meaningfully in the future?**

- **Who is God calling you to commune with in even greater ways?**



Use Your Gifts!

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

The last chapter addressed the socioeconomic stratification and the divisions between the rich and the poor that were evident in the life and practice of the church at Corinth. Paul was shocked. The lifestyle of the church and the way it mirrored the division of the broader culture were antithetical to the gospel of grace that the Corinthians had received. In our current passage Paul addresses spiritual status stratification.

The members of the church are looking at one another and are placing value judgments on one another based on performance, competence, and charisma. Some members have more “impressive” talents, skills, and gifts than others, and the Corinthian obsession with power and status is causing them to overvalue some members’ contributions and to undervalue the contributions of others. In this context Paul is looking to level the playing field—to underscore the inherent equality of all of the members and what they bring to the community.

This passage represents another thought transition in the letter, as Paul begins with, “Now concerning spiritual gifts . . .” (v. 1). The word pneumatikon here is different than the word for gifts in verse 4 (charismata). The word in verse 1 is probably best translated “spiritual things.” The Corinthians have written a letter to Paul, and they are interested in learning about “spiritual things,” and Paul says, “I do not want you to be uninformed.” This indicates that what Paul wants them to take note of is an important subject. Paul’s logic on the important matter of “spiritual things” will be examined in three different movements:

- The Givenness of Gifts
- The Reception of Gifts
- The Giver of Gifts¹¹

BREAK THE ICE

Can you remember a gift you opened on Christmas or your birthday that you never actually used?

¹¹ Hughes. Kent R., Um, Stephen T., 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross (Preaching the Word) Article: A Gift-Giving God (1 Corinthians 12:1-11). Crossway. 2015.

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

EXPLORE IT

1. What kind of objects did the Corinthians use to worship? (v. 2)
2. Who can never say “Jesus is accursed?” (v. 3)
3. What three essentially synonymous categories within the church demonstrate variety? (v. 4)
4. Why does God give manifestations of the Spirit? (v. 7)
5. Which nine gifts are given by the Spirit? (vv. 8-10)
6. Who decides which Christians get which gifts? (v. 11)

APPLY IT

An Achievement Mentality is Poisonous (vv. 1-3)

I was once speaking with one of my church members who is a faculty member of an elite university in Boston. He had received a very selective, prestigious research grant for which he had applied. Then he started to receive polite emails from all of his colleagues who said, “We’re proud of you, and it is well deserved . . . well deserved . . . well deserved.” He appreciated the fact that others were saying “well deserved,” but he was challenging that whole notion by saying, “Did I really deserve this?” It was a very keen moment of awareness for this man because most people tend to think, “Of course I deserve it. I’ve worked hard for this. I’m where I am because of all that I’ve achieved.”

An achievement mentality is poisonous. It pollutes self-understanding. One thinks he deserves a better life than the one he currently has, and he thinks he can procure it for himself if he expends the effort. We thus are unable to see the givenness of all of life. In the midst of an achievement culture Paul calls for a paradigm shift. He wants us to think of our identity as a gift.¹²

7. **These Christians used to worship idols that couldn’t speak, satisfy, or save. What are some things in life you’ve idolized, despite their inability to speak, satisfy, or save?**

8. **Paul reminds the Corinthians of their pagan past. How can remembering our past give us a healthy perspective? When is it good to forget about our past?**

9. **Paul mentions the value of correct knowledge three times in verses 1-3: “uninformed,” “know,” and “understand.” How have you grown in correct knowledge that fosters healthy spirituality?**

¹² Ibid

10. All true Christians proclaim that “Jesus is Lord.” How does this purge artificial levels of elitism from among followers of Jesus?

How to Receive Our Gifts with Gratitude (vv. 4-6)

In virtually all modern Christian churches there remains a great need to examine carefully the gifts of its members and to make use of them. This will mean each person, and no doubt especially the leadership, looking out for others and seeking out the gifts God may have given them so they may bring them to the community. For those who lead and have a tendency toward pride and self-sufficiency, it may be humbling to know that God wants them to depend on and be built up by others with different gifts. For others, though, this will mean accepting what God has given them and then living and working in the community for the benefit of the body, knowing that this is their God-given and Spirit-enabled duty to the body. Just as there is no place for pride, so there is no place for false humility.¹³

11. What’s one gift God has given to you so you can bless the others in your small group or at your church?

12. Even though each Christian has a different gifting mix, all the gifts come from the same triune Giver (Spirit, Lord Jesus, and God the Father). How can we, like our triune God, live out our differences but still be unified?¹⁴

¹³ Gardner, Paul. 1 Corinthians (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). Zondervan. 2018.

¹⁴ Crossway. 10 Key Bible Verses on Spiritual Gifts. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-key-bible-verses-on-spiritual-gifts> February 26, 2023.
- “Spirit . . . Lord . . . God. A Trinitarian reference to the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and God the Father (cf. 2 Cor. 13:14). The most common pattern in the NT Epistles is to refer to God the Father with the word “God” (Gk. Theos, which is the normal Septuagint translation for the OT Hb. ‘Elohim, “God”) and to refer to God the Son with the word “Lord” (Gk. Kyrios, which is used in the Septuagint over 6,000 times to translate the OT Hb. name YHWH, “Yahweh” or “LORD”). Therefore both names are evidence of deity. The diversity of divine persons within the unity of the Trinity should be reflected in the diversity of gifts within the unity of the body of Christ in Corinth. (See also Eph. 4:3–16.) Therefore Paul wants the Corinthian church to understand how their unity can be enhanced by appreciating the variety of gifts God has given to them.”

13. Have you ever felt like you have nothing to offer in the church? What does the word “everyone” in verse 7 mean about God’s vision for each Christian’s service?

For the Good of the Community (vv. 7–11)

Paul has established that all Christians are “spiritual” on two grounds: (1) all proclaim that Jesus is Lord and can only do so “by the Holy Spirit,” and (2) all are given different gifts by the same Spirit, that is, by God. Paul will move on to examine these different gifts, but for now he must return briefly to the second matter, that is, the purpose of the gifts. If they are provided to all Christians and are not given for the sake of indicating degrees of spirituality or status, then what are they given for? This verse offers a full answer that will be developed in detail as chapters 12–14 progress.

Gifts are given for the good of the community, that is, to build up the people of God.¹⁵

14. Which of the gifts listed below do you believe God has given to you? Check all that apply.

Prophecy	Serving	Teaching	Encouraging
Giving	Leadership	Mercy	Word of Wisdom
Word of Knowledge	Faith	Healing	Miraculous Powers
Discerning Spirits	Speaking in Tongues	Interpreting Tongues	Helps ¹⁶

15. Is there a form of service you sense God is calling you towards? What would be your next step in that direction?

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Is there a biblical spiritual gifts list? <https://www.gotquestions.org/spiritual-gifts-list.html> - “There are actually three biblical lists of the “gifts of the Spirit,” also known as spiritual gifts. The three main passages describing the spiritual gifts are Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11; and 1 Corinthians 12:28. We could also include Ephesians 4:11, but that is a list of offices within the church, not spiritual gifts, per se. The spiritual gifts identified in Romans 12 are prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leadership, and mercy. The list in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 includes the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. The list in 1 Corinthians 12:28 includes healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.”

16. Paul lists more gifts than just the ones the Corinthians thought were impressive. What does this say about serving in low-visibility roles?

17. The power to succeed in serving God always comes from God in the first place. How can we remember to serve in God's power, rather than our own?



Unity & Diversity

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The discussion moves on to the unity and diversity of the body of Christ, with the emphasis being on unity. Believers are unified since they have all been baptized into one body (12:12–13), yet there is also diversity since the body is made up of many parts (12:14). Since the body is one, it follows that no member is inferior (12:15–16), nor is any member comprehensive (12:17–20). A person's place in the body is assigned by God himself. Nor is any member of the body superior, for the weaker parts of the body are necessary (12:21–24). God has constituted the body so that the members will care for one another in both the sufferings and the joys of life (12:25–26). The chapter concludes with a listing of gifted people, which again indicates that the gifts in the church are varied (12:27–31a).¹⁷

If you've played a team sport before, like basketball, softball or soccer, you know the concept that when "if we win, I win." Learning your place on the team and how to use your skills to enable the greatest success for the team is essential. Team chemistry gets disrupted when the team leans too heavily on just one person's abilities or when others feel like they have nothing to contribute because they are not the top performer on the team. It is ironic to me when a league MVP (most valuable player) in a professional sport comes from a last place team. Certainly they should be rewarded for being the best player in the league, but were they really the "most valuable player?" In fact many teams that have one superstar end up doing poorly. That superstar will have great stats and accomplishments but unless the team has good team dynamics and other good players on the team they will not go anywhere.

To have a healthy relationship with a local church you have to know and believe that each person who follows Jesus, including you, is essential to that church. The Corinthians had many factions in their church and some really talented speakers and wise leaders and yet they were not really living up to the true potential they had as a local church. Instead of being built up in love and growing in sanctification they had pride issues, division and chaotic worship services where people were exalted over God. Paul desires for us to see in our text that we are one body made up of many members and each person brings something essential to the life, ministry and culture of the church. To do this Paul addresses social diversity in the church, the church as a body and finally the use of spiritual gifts.¹⁸

¹⁷ Schreiner, Thomas R.. 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Book 7) (pp. 331-332). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁸ David Frederick, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members," West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

APPLY IT

In the process of placing our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ we were baptized in one spirit and into one body regardless of our social background. This means that the Corinthians were meant to live out their life in the church in a way that was upside down from the culture around them. They were to study the Bible and eat and drink and pray with people who were slaves or free, Jews or Greeks, rich and poor, old and young.

This was a struggle for them as we've seen throughout the letter. But, their friendships were meant to be different than the world around them. Someone walking into the Corinthian church during a worship service should be confused because of who was gathered together and how much they're blessing and serving each other.¹⁹

4. Before we can get the practice of unity right, we have to get the theology of unity right. From a biblical perspective, what is the basis of unity within the Church?

5. What might it look like for someone walking into your church to see relationships that “confuse” them because of the diversity and unity within the congregation?

6. How would you explain the difference between unity and uniformity?

¹⁹ David Frederick, “1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members,” West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

Unity without diversity would produce uniformity, and uniformity tends to produce death. Life is a balance between unity and diversity. As a human body weakens, its systems slow down and everything tends to become uniform. The ultimate, of course, is that the body itself turns to dust. This helps to explain why some churches (and other Christian ministries) have weakened and died: There was not sufficient diversity to keep unity from becoming uniformity. Dr. Vance Havner has expressed it: “First there is a man, then a movement, then a machine, and then a monument.” Many ministries that began as a protest against “dead orthodoxy” became dead themselves, because in their desire to remain pure and doctrinally sound, they stifled creativity and new ideas. However, if diversity is not kept under control, it could destroy unity; and then you have anarchy. We shall discover in 1 Corinthians 13 that it is maturity that balances unity and diversity. The tension in the body between individual members and the total organism can only be solved by maturity.²⁰

7. How does this passage challenge and confront the idea that a person doesn’t need to be an active participant and contributor in the life and ministry of the church?

8. Essential to our church’s mission and vision is to discover, develop, and deploy disciples. How does our understanding of this passage play into the execution of that mission and vision?

²⁰ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Wise (1 Corinthians): Discern the Difference Between Man's Knowledge and God's Wisdom (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 140). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

Paul addresses the tendency to undervalue your place in the body of Christ in verses 15-20. Just because you're a foot and not a hand does not mean you're not essential to the body. God has arranged the parts of the body to serve a particular function for human life to flourish and so he does the church (1 Corinthians 12:18). Can you imagine being at a church where everyone has the same gifts, strengths and weaknesses you have? It sounds boring and limited. Likewise what about being at a church where everyone has the gift of teaching but no one has the gift of hospitality? Or how about a church with the gift of administration but no one has the gift of leadership? These gifts are all essential and really flourish when they're complimented by other gifts that the Lord apportions. This means that even if our world's culture devalues the types of gifts you have, the Lord sees them as so essential that he gave them to you by the Spirit to be used in the church.²¹

9. Why might the value of some gifts be downplayed in the church?

10. How does the church practically live out what Paul says in verses 23-24?

²¹ David Frederick, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members," West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

What about those who take pride in their gifts and overvalue their contribution to the church? Paul addresses this problem in verses 21 and following where he says of one part of the body saying to another “I have no need of you.” The Corinthians would rank certain gifts as being better than others and therefore more indispensable in their mind and Paul is saying to them, “if you really knew which gifts were indispensable you would not be boasting.” There are parts of the human body that you cannot live without and they’re typically weaker or hidden parts and not the ones you bestow a lot of honor for. You may compliment someone about having a great arm in football or nice hair, etc but you never say that someone has great white blood cells. Some parts of the body get praised more than others but all are essential and if you were missing some of the weaker or less honorable parts you’d notice it and be unable to continue to do what you do on a day by day basis. So it is with the church and when we recognize this truth unity is built up (1 Corinthians 12:25).²²

11. How does the perspective that places higher value on more visible or public roles in the church miss the full picture of the body of Christ?

12. How can you encourage and affirm the people serving in more “hidden” roles in your church that you’ve never thought about but would notice immediately if they disappeared?

²² David Frederick, “1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Study Guide: One Body, Many Members,” West Hills Community Church, October 20, 2021, <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/10/20/1-corinthians-12-12-31-study-guide-one-body-many-members>.

The interdependence of the body continues to be advanced in the argument. Since God has sovereignly and wisely appointed the place and role of each person in the body, and since it was his intention that the church have unity and diversity, as we see in a human body, the eye cannot say to the hand and the head cannot say to the feet: I don't need you! Those who think they can be independent are deluded; they are, so to speak, cutting off their own hands or feet.²³

13. Given the human tendency to undervalue and overvalue different gifts within the church, how might comparing one person's giftings to another's potentially cause harm to the unity within the body?

14. How can verse 26 be true in a church where it's difficult to know everyone personally?

15. What do you think Paul means when he says, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts," in verse 31?

²³ Schreiner, Thomas R.. 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Book 7) (p. 348). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Now there is nothing more beautiful and more effective and more exquisitely, delicately balanced than the church of Jesus Christ. Spiritually it is the most marvelous organism in the whole universe. The angels are longing to look into the functioning of the Body of Christ in the world today. God has put it together, therefore, we ought to have great care for one another.²⁴

16. Throughout this chapter Paul has mentioned various giftings within the church. Recognizing that this list isn't intended to be an exhaustive list of giftings, take a moment to consider how those different giftings each contribute to the health and vibrancy of the church.

17. How would you describe a church that is “firing on all cylinders” as it discovers, develops, and deploys disciples in their God-given giftings?

²⁴ Ray Stedman, “How the Body Works,” Ray Stedman Authentic Christianity, January 7, 1979, <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/1-corinthians/how-the-body-works>.

Studies were compiled and questions were written by Pastor Jeremy Anderson (Indian Creek Campus Pastor)



Endless Love

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

A little girl was invited for dinner at the home of her first-grade friend. The vegetable was buttered broccoli and the mother asked if she liked it. "Oh, yes," the child replied politely, "I love it!"

But when the bowl of broccoli was passed, she declined to take any. The hostess said, "I thought you said you loved broccoli." The girl replied sweetly, "Oh, yes ma'am, I do, but not enough to eat it!"

Do you love your family? "Of course I do!" We all would say that! It's the only right answer. But what do you mean by love? So often we love our family like that little girl loved broccoli: We love in the abstract, but when it comes right down to it, we don't want to get too close. In the words of the Apostle John, we love in word, but not in deed and truth (1 John 3:18).

What does biblical love look like? We know that our relationships in the family need to be marked by love. Husbands, especially, are to love their wives. But, wives, too, must love their husbands. Parents and children, brothers and sisters, must love one another. But how do we know what such love looks like in everyday dress?

Paul's famous chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, tells us. The Corinthian church was emphasizing a good thing, spiritual gifts, to the neglect of the best. They were using their gifts apart from love. Paul makes the point that the use of their God-given gifts would amount to nothing if the Corinthians did not make love their priority.

Selfless love is the priority for every Christian.²⁵

BREAK THE ICE

In your opinion, what is the best love song of all time? Why?

²⁵ Cole, Steve. "Lesson 5: What Love Looks Like (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)." Bible.org, 1995. <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-5-what-love-looks-1-corinthians-134-7>.

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

EXPLORE IT

1. What virtue is Paul extolling in chapter 13?
2. List the 5 things in verses 1-3 that we could do/have that are worthless without love.
3. What does love rejoice in?
4. What things will pass away when “the perfect comes”?
5. In verse 12, Paul compares the knowledge we have in this life to looking into a dimly lit _____?
6. What 3 virtues does Paul say will abide or remain?

APPLY IT

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. The “love” chapter. It is often quoted at weddings to describe what love is, but to only think of 1 Corinthians 13 in this context really limits our understanding. Chapter 13 falls within the latter half of 1 Corinthians where Paul has exhorted how church members are to interact as a church body, specifically within the chapters dealing with spiritual gifts.

It might first appear that an explanation of love in chapter 13 is out of place, since chapters 12 and 14 directly deal with spiritual gifts. Yet chapter 13 is a necessary link in Paul’s argument for how believers are to use spiritual gifts. Each instance of the word “love” in chapter 13 is the Greek word “agape.” “Agape” is selfless love, the kind of love that we see when looking to the cross. “The cross is the paradigm case of the act of will and stance which places welfare of others above the interests of the self.”

7. Why do good spiritual acts gain “nothing” for us if we do them without love?

9. Since “God is love” according to 1 John 4:16, this passage describes God’s character in a real sense. What do you see about God’s character that is surprising to you? What is reassuring?

35 of 38

It's both useful and important for us to recognize that in Greek—despite in English some of these words are here as adjectives—in Greek, all of these facets are in verbal form. Why is that important? Well, it's important because Paul's emphasis here is not so much upon what love is as it is upon what love does—that love behaves itself in a certain way, and that the fact that these facets are written as doing words is a reminder to us that if we merely read the Word, hear the Word, and do not put it into practice, then it is of no avail to us, and we're actually like the foolish man who built his house on the sand. So it's important to realize they are all in verbal form.

Now, in considering these characteristics, we need to keep in mind also that Paul is not writing as a technician. This is not a technical list, as it were. Nor is he writing as a theoretician. But he is writing, rather, as a practitioner. He realizes that what is necessary in Corinth is not simply instruction but transformation. It must be truth applied—not truth simply learned in the head but truth that is channeled through to the hands and the feet and so on.²⁷

10. Which of the characteristics of love mentioned in these verses (e.g., patience, kindness, not being envious) do you find most challenging to live out?

11. How can you practice loving others even when it's difficult or inconvenient?

12. Love “believes all things” or “always trusts.” But is it loving to trust a person who has repeatedly violated our trust? Where do you draw the line?

²⁷ <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/characters-of-christian-love-pt-1/>

Humorist Sam Levenson says, “Love at first sight is easy to understand. It’s when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle” (*Reader’s Digest* [3/83]). But it’s not really a miracle; it’s the result of yielding to God, repeatedly confronting our selfishness and daily practicing biblical love in our homes.

An old legend says that in his old age the apostle John was so weak that he had to be carried into the church meetings. At the end of the meeting he would be helped to his feet to give a word of exhortation. He would invariably repeat, “Little children, love one another.”

The disciples grew weary of the same words every time. Finally they asked him why he said the same thing over and over. He replied, “Because it is the commandment of the Lord, and the observation of it alone is sufficient.”

Someone has said that if we discovered that we had only five minutes left to say all we wanted to say, every telephone booth would be occupied by people calling other people to stammer that they loved them. Selfless love is our priority. “Pursue love” (14:1).²⁸

13. What do you think Paul means by “when the perfect comes”? Why will prophecies, tongues, and knowledge pass away but love will endure?

14. In what ways does the concept of love’s endurance provide comfort or reassurance? How have you experienced enduring love in your life?

²⁸ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-5-what-love-looks-1-corinthians-134-7>

15. Identify three ways in which expressed love is seen well in your church community and experience, and three ways in which it can improve?

16. How can you practically show love to your brothers and sisters in Christ this week?