

Bible Study Guide: Week of 5-22-2023

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

1 Corinthians 12

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹²For 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. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would 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. ¹⁶And if the ear would 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

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In this passage Paul is addressing a question that the Corinthian Christians themselves likely asked him to address. At the very least, he seems to be aware of some unsettling or unacceptable practices among the Corinthians when it came to the topic of spiritual gifts. Based on what Paul says about speaking in tongues throughout this letter, it seems there were some Christians at Corinth who had this gift and who believed it to be superior to other spiritual gifts. Some denominations today—the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions come to mind—emphasize this spiritual gift of speaking in tongues as superior to other gifts. Paul seems to do the opposite, however. Notably at the end of this passage we will see he lists the gift of tongues last of all. Further, here in the beginning of this passage he uses this play on words with the word “speak.” While some in Corinth prided themselves on their “own” gift of tongues, Paul points out that all of them once followed gods who could not speak. That is, it is the Spirit of the true living God that truly has the power over

all tongues and, indeed, all spiritual gifts. Further, he says, the mere speaking of the phrase “Jesus is Lord” is a sure sign that one has the Holy Spirit. This simple phrase may seem trivial to us, but it represents one of the earliest parts of Christian proclamation. Not only that, but it would have been a powerful and provocative phrase. To say that “Jesus is Lord” would be, in essence, the same as saying “Caesar is NOT Lord.” This would have been a politically dangerous and unpopular opinion to express aloud. Therefore, Paul says, the Spirit is at work within anyone who dares to confess Jesus as Lord. That “tongue” alone is a gift of the Holy Spirit, to say nothing of other tongues on which some of the Corinthians prided themselves.

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Here Paul continues to emphasize the wide variety of gifts given, but also the unity that all those who have gifts of the Spirit have because the same Lord and Spirit gives and activates all gifts in all believers. At this point, no doubt, the Corinthians would want to know why the gifts were distributed among them in the way that they were. In other words, why do some speak in tongues and others do not? To answer that, Paul turns to one of his most famous metaphors: the body.

¹²For 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. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would 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. ¹⁶And if the ear would 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Think of the members of your body. We might think of large parts or organs and systems as Paul does: The eye, the hand, and so on. But think about how complex an eye is. You have various kinds of cells, nerves, blood vessels, a retina, a lens, and iris, a pupil, and so on. Think of all the musculature necessary to move the eye. Think about the pathways that allow that visual stimuli to become conscious thought. Our bodies are bafflingly complex things made up of literally trillions of parts! One estimate I read says that the human body has over 30 trillion cells. Now imagine if half of those quit working. What would happen to the body? Even though one part may seem superficially more or less important, the whole organism is dependent upon all parts working and interacting. That is what Paul says our life in Christ is like. We each have unique gifts and functions. If one part goes amiss, the whole body suffers for it. Even the parts we think of as less important causes pain to the whole body when it is missing or broken. Think of your little toe. I bet you haven’t thought about that toe today. If you have, it is probably because it is hurting. Those little parts you don’t notice or care about until something goes wrong are still part of the body and still important and needed.

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Here, Paul pulls back out of the metaphor of the body and turns his attention to the gifts given to those in the body of Christ. Rather than list tongues first, he says that apostles are first, then prophets, then teachers...all the way down to the last gifts named: the speaking and interpretation of tongues. In chapter 13, Paul will go on to talk about “the more excellent way”—the way of love. Just as the body needs food, air, water, and so on to be healthy, Paul says that the main thing the body of Christ needs is love. In chapter 13 he will say even if he can speak in all tongues and has all knowledge and wisdom, without love he is nothing. The main thing the Corinthian church needed to be reminded of is their own interdependence on one another and also of the love they are to have for one another.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. What role does the Holy Spirit seem to be playing in this passage?**
- 2. Do you know what your spiritual gift(s) is/are? How does God call you to use your gifts for the good of the church?**
- 3. Do you think some spiritual gifts are more or less important than others? Why or why not?**