

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

In chapters eight through ten, Paul addressed the issue of food sacrificed to idols. That was the “presenting problem,” although the real issue was that the Corinthians were not living as the community of grace that they were. The freedom they rightly had was not being exercised with a proper view of the community that Jesus had made them.

In chapters twelve through fourteen, Paul is addressing the issue of “spiritual gifts.” That is the “presenting problem,” although the real issue is that the Corinthians are not living as the community of grace that they are. The gifts they rightly could be exercising were not being used with a view toward the community that Jesus had made them. This is what Paul begins to address in chapter twelve.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

We begin our discussion with a common experience that can open the way to really appreciating the analogy that Paul uses in chapter twelve. Sometimes having your arm or leg “fall asleep” can be a humorous thing; feel free to explore the idea with an eye on the humor that is possible. The underlying point? That a part of your own body can end up functionally being “disconnected”—and that has impact on the whole body. (Just try walking when your leg has fallen asleep!)

When you turn to the passage, that idea of “parts of the body” is at the heart of Paul’s thoughts. He draws on everyone’s awareness of how a body (one’s own physical body) is made up of various parts but it is still just one body to explore right thinking about life in the community of faith—the body of Christ.

Corinth was a community experiencing a fair amount of division. Earlier in the letter we noticed that lines were drawn over favored teachers, between brothers and sisters over law suits, and even at the Lord’s Table where some ate and drank and others were ignored. That divisiveness was antithetical to the truth of who they were—collectively and by grace—in Christ. They really were one body, they just weren’t living like that.

When it came to spiritual gifts, there was also division. There were some in Corinth who were privileging certain gifts; they saw one or another manifestation of the Spirit as something of a “badge” of superior spirituality. And such an attitude resulted in divisions in the body.

Paul begins this section by underscoring the *one*-body-ness of the body of Christ (12:12-13). All believers share a common life with Jesus; all believers share a common experience of the one Spirit. After laying that foundation, he presses on to address the divisions—the comparison thinking that was causing those in the body to not function as the body.

He first addresses (12:14-20) those who have concluded that they

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
12:12-31

must not matter much to the body because they don’t see themselves as having one of the privileged or “superior” gifts. Drawing on the metaphor of the physical body, Paul affirms that just because a part thinks of itself as non-essential or unvalued does not make it the case.

Some part of the body might say, “I am not *that* part,” referring to some other “part” of the body that he or she (or others) thinks is a more important part. But Paul insists that such self-assessment is of no value in understanding how the body is to function. Seeing as the Spirit gives the gifts that He does sovereignly and as He sees fit, and seeing as the Spirit doesn’t give useless or needless gifts, whatever one “is” in the body is not only sovereignly arranged but also divinely necessary.

Then Paul turns his attention to the second way the preferential view of certain gifts was resulting in division in the body.

Some, in privileging certain gifts, ended up concluding that a certain presence and power of the Spirit in one’s life set that person apart from “average” (or “below average!”) Christians.

Paul again uses the image of the human body to help his readers understand life in the body of Christ. Some parts of the body (the physical body) that appear to be weaker are, in fact, indispensable. You might know or see or even be aware of some of your inner organs (that couldn’t handle life on the “outside” like your skin and hands and feet); but these seemingly weaker organs are vital. Some parts of the physical body are not as “presentable” publicly and so they are treated with modesty and are not displayed the same as the more publicly presentable parts.

But in all of this, Paul’s point is clear—no one can say that he or she is and has all that is necessary for spiritual growth, because we are part of a body, and all the parts are necessary for health and growth.

So taken as a whole, in this section Paul addresses both possible grounds for division that arise from a mis-valuing of certain gifts. No one can (rightly!) say that because they don’t have “gift A” that they are either unnecessary or insignificant in the body. Nor can anyone (rightly!) say that because I do have “gift A” that I can do without certain others in the body.

Neither attitude reflects rightly the truths that Paul has been underscoring. Specifically:

1. The Spirit gives every member of the *one body* of Christ gifts that He deems valuable, necessary, and appropriate.
2. This means that there are no superfluous or insignificant parts of the body for all have a Spirit-given, grace-designed part to play.
3. In both not appreciating and valuing others and not giving oneself to a purposeful participation in the body, one ignores both the Spirit’s work and the reality of life as the body of Christ.



INITIAL THOUGHTS

Have you ever had an arm or a leg or a hand “fall asleep”? When the blood flow is insufficient, you get that “dead appendage” effect! What’s it like to function with an “asleep” part of your body?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

When your hand or leg falls asleep, it is not less a part of your body—it’s just not able to function the way it was designed to function. And, the whole body is effected. That idea is at the heart of Paul’s further explanation of gifted “body life.”

Everyone in Corinth wasn’t struggling with the idea of “giftedness” in quite the same way. What is the issue Paul addresses in 12:14-20? What misguided thinking or unhelpful heart attitude does he have in view?

Although he draws on the same metaphor, in 12:21-26 Paul speaks to a different attitude about giftedness. What is the issue Paul speaks to in this section? What misguided thinking or unhelpful attitude does he have in view?

In this section, Paul reiterates his “big idea” more than once. What does he underscore in verses 14, 20, and 27?

State what you think the main point of this chapter is in your own words:

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

If Paul had you in mind when writing this chapter, which section do you think he would highlight? 12:14-20 where the focus is on the person who discounts his or her place in the body because she or he is not gifted liked someone else? Or 12:21-26 where the emphasis is on the person who doesn’t properly value others because of the awareness of his or her own giftedness? Why?

What will the Lord have to do in your heart and in our fellowship for us to enter more fully into the kind of life that Paul pictures for us in this chapter?

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
12:12-31

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Have you ever had an arm or a leg or a hand “fall asleep”? When the blood flow is insufficient, you get that “dead appendage” effect! What’s it like to function with an “asleep” part of your body?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

When your hand or leg falls asleep, it is not less a part of your body—it’s just not able to function the way it was designed to function. And, the whole body is effected. That idea is at the heart of Paul’s further explanation of gifted “body life.”

Everyone in Corinth wasn’t struggling with the idea of “giftedness” in quite the same way. What is the issue Paul addresses in 12:14-20? What misguided thinking or unhelpful heart attitude does he have in view?

Although he draws on the same metaphor, in 12:21-26 Paul speaks to a different attitude about giftedness. What is the issue Paul speaks to in this section? What misguided thinking or unhelpful attitude does he have in view?

In this section, Paul reiterates his “big idea” more than once. What does he underscore in verses 14, 20, and 27?

State what you think the main point of this chapter is in your own words:

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

If Paul had you in mind when writing this chapter, which section do you think he would highlight? 12:14-20 where the focus is on the person who discounts his or her place in the body because she or he is not gifted liked someone else? Or 12:21-26 where the emphasis is on the person who doesn’t properly value others because of the awareness of his or her own giftedness? Why?

What will the Lord have to do in your heart and in our fellowship for us to enter more fully into the kind of life that Paul pictures for us in this chapter?

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
12:12-31