

Series: Debunking Lies that Disrupt Intergenerational Community

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 12:20-26 (App to get lesson/slides, ask questions. Color Pg)

In this series, we're debunking untruths we've come to believe that disrupt intergenerational spiritual formation. We're doing the uncomfortable work of unlearning where we confess, repent, change how we live. **1 Corinthians 12** has a **human body** metaphor to illustrate how God designed the new humanity to be reconciled representatives of Jesus, the Messiah-Christ. This text is ideal for Bible Art lovers! Our clever curator, Gwynn, and her skillful sister, Eleanor, created a template (see last page of these notes) to fill in according to how we see the body, like ministries and ministers who personally impact us.

1st century writers used the **body** as a metaphor for a society (political **body**) in which the Roman emperor was the head of citizens divided by hierarchy and status. Knowing the gospel flips this script, Paul repurposed their metaphor to depict Jesus as the humble **head** of a renewed social order (body politic) which values every **member**. After debunking the myth of inferiority (the false feeling that we're unnecessary to the work of the church), Paul also debunked the myth of superiority (the absurd idea that we're enough on our own). So, this chapter illustrates how passive inferiority and aggressive superiority both create **division** in **the body of Christ**. Both attitudes were present in the 1st century church and still exist today. They stem from the false idea that spirituality is a private journey of personal empowerment and growth. But Romans 12:3,6 NLT says, *"Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us...In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well."* I'll illustrate the foolishness of both ideas with some everyday examples. The inferior attitude can harm your **body** (think needing to move heavy stuff or caregiving without help), and it can harm **Christ's body** (less helpful to us/deprive us of God-given gifts/personality). Similarly, the superior attitude can harm your **body** (see self as a one-person machine), and it can harm **Christ's body** (makes Christians look prideful, divided, and full of ourselves).

Let's pick up where we left off in **verses 20-21** which illustrate the absurdity of **body parts** feeling superior: *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."* Professor Tom Shreiner put this more bluntly: *"Those who think they can be independent are deluded; they are, so to speak, cutting off their own hands or feet."* Today, we'll wrestle with 3 words about **Christ's body** that challenge us to become radically renewed humans who embody this....

BIG IDEA: Believers must root out division with equal care.

First, we find the word **INDISPENSABLE** as we read **verse 22**: *On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.* This implies we must renew our minds about the **parts** of our **bodies** and society we view as **weak**. Paul used **weak** in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 to demonstrate how faith develops at different rates. [You can click a link in our notes](#) to learn more, but it is common for believers to have a **weaker** conscience--we may mentally agree that "faith alone" saves but take years to become fully assured that Jesus will never cut us loose. I say this is common because it's truly hard to process how Christ's work on the cross fully secures salvation without our help! That is why we share reassuring Scriptures and receive communion every Sunday. Anyway, society is often impatient with slow learners and ridicules "**weak links**" instead of relating with them. In **Christ's body**, however, we're to see all **parts** as **indispensable**! When someone's value is a mystery to us, we should get to know them and pray for eyes to see how they make us a better image of Jesus. Organizational psychologist Adam Grant rightly noted that *"We judge people too much by their fleeting opinions—and too little by their consistent actions. Anyone you meet is likely to hold some views you dislike. No one is as bad as their worst idea, and no belief is set in stone"*. Romans 14:1-3 says: *"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions...for God has welcomed him."* One benefit of believing no **member** is **indispensable** and welcoming folks to our tables the way Jesus welcomes us is that we can experience how *"His strength is made perfect in OUR weakness"* (cf. 2 Corinthians 12).

Next, we find the word **HONOR** as we read *verses 23-24a: 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. Honoring* someone is to esteem or value them. In Paul's mind, *Christ's spiritual body parts* deserve no less treatment than we give the *less honorable* or *unpresentable parts* of our physical *bodies*--internal organs and "private parts" that need protective coverings. Even *parts* that aren't seen, understood or experienced by everyone have value. In Paul's 1st century context, few got to view or touch high value *parts* of the societal *body*, like how their emperor was protected from public access like a modern head of state. Likewise, the more *presentable parts* of *Christ's body* should honor, protect, cover (have the backs of) the less *presentable* or prominent. This text also evokes images of Israel's Old Testament travels--their physically *weaker members* (e.g., children, elderly, disabled) were sandwiched between physically *stronger members* who walked ahead and behind to protect them. Our text also hints at how men and women are different by design, are both made in God's image, are not interchangeable, and that equality is not about conformity or uniformity. Biblically speaking, then, all the *indispensable member-parts* of *Christ's body* deserve *honor*.

Lastly, we find the word **CARE** as we read *verses 24b-25: 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*. Lifestyles that promote *division* have sadly become the norm today. *Christ's church*, on the other hand, is called to unifying thoughts and habits like *having the same care for one another*. The Greek word for *care* calls us to be "anxious, troubled, or distracted with concern for one another" like parents who can't sleep until their young driver arrives safely home. Check out his 2 everyday examples in *verse 26: If one member suffers, all suffer together AND if one member is honored, all rejoice together*. Families rally for support in times of pain, sickness, and death. We gather gleefully for weddings, birthdays, or other milestones. If the barometric pressure changes, the pain in my eyes can slow down my whole *body*. If my ears hear a snappy tune, the rest of my *body* instinctively gets

involved. So, Paul didn't merely mean, "*think of each other occasionally*" like how some say, "*I'm thinking of/praying for you*" but don't. He was certainly not saying, "*squander your time and money, then give what's left.*" It's more like choosing to delay sleep for good reasons or gladly using your PTO to attend a funeral. The thing is, faith calls us to live with others in mind all the time, as if there's nothing more necessary than nurturing ***Christ's body for the common good!*** Philippians 2:3 calls us to "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*" Being too busy to pray, be present, and arrange ***care for one another*** is like the belly of Christ's body indulging itself until the whole body is eventually sick and dying. Of course, none of us can physically ***care*** for every ***member***, so just start small. Consider questions like these: "*Who is in your small group? Who has Jesus arranged for you to routinely cross paths with? Who lives near you that you might run into while running your errands? Who's the one person that checks in on you or that you check in on frequently? Who arrives for Sunday service looking frazzled and with hands full?*" Notice how God already shows up and orchestrates encounters around you--learn to see them as divine appointments instead of disturbing distractions. Such intentional living makes life more meaningful for you and others AND will make our church a better image of Christ in Clermont County. Ponder all this with your people this week and remember, wherever you are on your journey of trusting Christ, you don't have to work through anything alone. Please reach out.

Sunday to Monday Connection:

- **Question:** See questions in the above lesson.
- **Next Step:** See ideas in the above lesson.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. What are some ways that God scores people and ideas differently than the world? What are some theological ideas that we might fight about while ignoring biblical commands like we see in this text, and what's wrong with that? What types of people are you called to love that you despise?

2. God wants us to look like his son, who was a servant. In what ways do Christians live more like kings than servants? Where do you see these tendencies in your life, and what could you change?
3. What do 1 Corinthians 12 and John 17 reveal about why we must relentlessly root division out of the church?
4. The paragraph about honor addresses how the more *presentable parts* of Christ's body must have the backs of the less presentable parts. Which do you consider yourself to be and why? In your mind, who qualifies as less presentable or less deserving of honor, and why? Can you share any examples of when you have supported the weaker members of Christ's body, and if there aren't any, think of ways that you could love others the way you love yourself.
5. How does it look to care for every member of Christ's body equally?
6. In what ways is your life conformed to culture or structured purely for self? In what ways have you begun living for and caring about anyone other than you?

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Context:** "Chapter 12 thus insists on the need for diversity of gifts within the unity of the body. Chapter 13 stresses that without love the gifts are worthless. Chapter 14 then focuses on two of the more controversial gifts—prophecy and tongues—telling the Corinthians to prefer the former to the latter because of its more immediate intelligibility (vv. 1–25) and giving guidelines for the use of each so as to promote order in the church (vv. 26–40)." (Blomberg, 242)
- **Body politic:** "In some famous examples where Roman orators declared that the whole society was like a human body, the point they were making, as well as the interdependence of the 'body politic' as we say, was that the different jobs involved a difference of status. Some, quite simply, were more important than others: more high-profile, more honourable, carrying more dignity, more valuable to the common good. Others, by contrast, were dishonourable, fit for people of a lower sort, more dispensable. This attitude, of course, was sadly not confined to pagan Romans; it has recurred throughout history...Paul must have known that many non-Christian and non-Jewish writers had already used the metaphor of the 'body' as a way of talking about social, civic and political life. There were political theorists in his own day who could speak in that way of the state, or the empire, or the cosmos, as a single body, perhaps with the emperor as its head, but certainly with the different citizens all having their own parts to play. Here and elsewhere, Paul is marking out an identity for the Christians as a new and different sort of community, owing allegiance to a new and different 'Lord' (see verse 3)." (Wright, 160-164)
- **Truly Christian Work:** "Now Paul looks at the other side of the coin. He turns from the humbler members, who thought their lack of the spectacular gifts might disqualify them from membership of the church, to those possessed of great gifts, who evidently looked down on their less gifted brothers. In their lofty eminence they thought that they could manage well enough without the unimportant contributions of lowly people. But the eye

cannot do without the hand, nor the head without the feet. One member of the body may perform its own function well, but that does not mean that it can dispense with the services of other members which perform different functions, functions that it cannot perform. Barclay comments, ‘Whenever we begin to think about our own importance in the Church, the possibility of really Christian work is gone.’ (Morris, 170)

- **What makes our witness unique:** “Verse 11 provides a crucial caution against the natural human tendency to want or expect everyone else to be gifted in the ways we are. It completely refutes all claims that any one gift is necessary for someone to be a Christian, or to be a mature Christian, or to be in the center of God’s activity in some part of the world. Just as ‘there are no one-member churches,’ neither ‘are there any every-member gifts!’ ... Verse 13, like Galatians 3:28, also reminds us of the crucial need in every age for the church to model heterogeneous groupings that cause the world to marvel at our unity within diversity (cf. Eph. 4:4–11). Church should be a place where people gather and get along with each other who have no merely human reason for doing so. (Blomberg, 251-252)
- **Less honorable:** “The point seems impossible to miss. The slaves and the poor, those considered *atimoi* (‘dishonorable’) outside Christ’s community, Christ considers honored in his community. In fact, to topple any division among believers (12:25), God gives ‘abundant honor’ (*perissoteran timēn*; NIV: ‘greater honor’) to those who are without status (*hysteroumenō*; NIV: ‘the parts that lacked it’)...Paul argues that diversity can thrive in community and even strengthen its unity. Diversity becomes a threat to unity only when individual believers confuse God’s purpose with their own desire for prominence and recognition. Members of the Christ community must revisit what it means to live as the incarnate body of Christ. As in the physical body, no part is dispensable; everyone is significant. Any notion that a believer can be disconnected from active participation in the body is foreign to Paul. (Vang, 173-174)
- **Weaker:** “Verses 21–26 continue the analogy but begin to apply it to the church. Where there is seemingly less value, power, or honor in the body, compensation occurs to preserve relative equality. In fact, the true value of a particular body part is often inversely proportional to its outward appearance. When Paul speaks of weaker body parts (v. 22) he may be thinking of fingers or toes, or the less protected organs such as one’s eyes. The ‘less honorable’ parts (v. 23a) may refer to internal organs, usually covered by clothing, since the verb for “treat” can also mean ‘clothe.’ The ‘unpresentable’ parts (v. 23b) most naturally refer to genitalia and the excretory tracts. Paul’s fundamental concern is that the gifts and/or people the Corinthians are demeaning should be affirmed, while those they are overly exalting should be put in more balanced perspective. Presumably, he has in mind the more visible and dramatic gifts, but he may also be thinking of the more wealthy power brokers in the church—recall 11:17–34. So, verse 26 rounds out Paul’s discussion of the body with another reminder of mutuality and interdependence. What modern medicine has recently come to understand even better than did the

ancients—that the body is a psychosomatic whole—should apply that much more to the fellowship of believers. One individual’s joy or suffering should prove contagious.” (Blomberg, 246-247)

- **Less presentable parts:** “Never let one part say to another, I don’t need you!” In fact, when Paul does agree that some parts of the body are less presentable than others—that there are some parts (the sexual organs, obviously) that we cover up and are ashamed to expose in public—he turns the argument around and insists that these parts are thereby given a greater honour. What does he mean by this? Perhaps he is thinking of the way in which, in a great imperial household, the person with greatest honour is the person who is normally protected from view. The emperor himself does not come out and appear to everyone walking past on the street. Only the minor officials do that. From this point of view, the ‘shame’ which covers up certain parts of the body should not imply that we wish we did not possess such things. It should imply, rather, that these things are far too important for every passer-by to glance at. Perhaps also, underneath this argument, is Paul’s deeply Jewish sense, already evidenced in 11:2–11, that the male/female distinction, marked of course by the sexual organs, is one of the creator’s most important signs in our human nature, in which male and female together reflect God’s image (Genesis 1:26–28, despite the strange passage in 11:7 of the present letter). Some philosophies despised the body, and the sexual organs in particular, as dirty, shabby, and potentially or actually evil. Paul, by contrast, celebrates them as God-given. (Wright, 164)
- **Not just the church we see:** “Paul clearly has the life of the local congregation in mind. He wants every Christian in Corinth to value every other Christian, and to care for him or her, just like the hand comes to bandage the injured foot, or the foot hurries to take the injured head to hospital. That remains enormously important in every Christian fellowship, congregation and church the world over. But we in our age have been given, through instant electronic communication, a far more detailed picture of the worldwide church than any previous generation has ever had; and shall we restrict our sense of being members of the Messiah’s body simply to the people we see every week? Should we not also rejoice with, or grieve with, all Christians around the globe who celebrate or suffer?” (Wright, 165)
- **Christ’s body is also global:** “Implementing verse 26 will require every believer to be regularly and intimately involved with a network of Christian friends who commit to pray for each other and learn how to suffer and rejoice with each other through ‘thick and thin.’ These pairs, trios, and small groups, ideally the outgrowth of one larger local church, can then be enabled to look beyond themselves via prayer lists of broader concerns, communication between sister congregations, networks of information about the church of Jesus Christ locally and globally, and active missionary concerns, including regular correspondence, telephoning, fax, and travel from one part of the world to another.” (Blomberg, 257)

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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