

The Body Together

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

September 11, 2022

Good morning, church family! I've been looking forward to Kickoff Sunday all summer and here we are. I love how Kickoff Sunday has become an annual tradition as we get ready to resume so many of our ministries this fall.

Like the start of a new school year or the beginning of a new sports season, Kickoff Sunday is all about anticipation and celebration. We are looking forward in *anticipation* to what God will do in and through us as a church family as we seek to *become deeply devoted followers of Jesus together*. We've got some exciting things planned for the coming season of ministry, but none of us really knows how the Lord will work as he fulfills his promise to build his church (Matt. 16:18).

Today is also a day of celebration. It's more than an excuse to wear our team colors to church and to eat tacos together at noon. It's more than just a day to visit the tables in the Connection Cafe at our Ministry Fair. It's a day to celebrate that the Lord Jesus has gathered his people together as his church.

When we hear the word *church*, we may think of a space like this, the building where God's people gather for worship. That's not wrong, but the New Testament gives us a more complete picture of the church with various word pictures.

Sometimes the church is compared to a building. For example, the Apostle Peter compared Christians to *living stones*. The church, then—not the building but the believers—is described as a spiritual house, a temple of the Holy Spirit in which Jesus Christ is our chosen and precious Cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:1-8).

In that same letter, Peter also compared the church to a flock of sheep (1 Pet. 5:2). That metaphor might sound funny to our modern ears, but to the Christians living in Peter's day, this would have made perfect sense. We're reminded of a theme that runs through the whole Bible that the Lord our Good Shepherd cares for his flock (Ps. 23).

But perhaps one of the most vivid pictures of what the church is like can be found in passages like the one we are exploring this morning. I invite you to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 12. If you didn't bring a Bible with you today, we've got copies available in the back of this room for you to use. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 12, or if you're using one of those blue Bibles, go to page 1784.

We're picking up this portion of the Apostle Paul's letter in verse 12 where we will see how the church functions (or is supposed to function) like a healthy human body.

If we were working our way chapter by chapter through this letter the way we have been through the book of Revelation, we would have a better understanding of the context in which this illustration was originally given. We'll return to Revelation next

Sunday, but for today I want us to consider together this picture of the church as the body of Christ in order that we might apply this passage to our own church and to our lives as *deeply devoted followers of Jesus*.

Simply put, while the church in Corinth had a lot going for it, it also had its share of dysfunction. One portion of the church considered themselves to be insiders—the real church, while the other group felt like they were on the outside looking in.

That's why in the first few verses of this passage Paul wanted to emphasize the church's unity in Christ. Let's look at what Paul said there in verses 12-14:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so, the body is not made up of one part but of many (1 Cor. 12:12-14, NIV).

Paul's basic point is this: what is true of our physical bodies is also true of Christ's body, the church.

First, just as our human bodies are made up of many parts, so too is this true of the body of Christ. What's great about this illustration is that it's universally understandable. Even preschool kids know we've all got a head, shoulders, knees, and toes.

Second, Paul emphasized that regardless of our earthly distinctions, all Christians belong to one church, one body—the body of Christ. A local church in a particular geographical area may be made up of people who share the same ethnicity or culture. But as far as Christ is concerned, believers in Bemidji belong to the same universal body as believers in Beijing.

Third, Paul wanted to make clear that the same Holy Spirit dwelt in every Christian and the same Holy Spirit had incorporated them into one body. No one believer had more of the Spirit than did another. No one could claim to be more spiritual than his brother or sister in Christ. Even when the Spirit entrusted various spiritual gifts to each individual believer, no one Christian could claim that their status in the body was greater or lesser based on how the Holy Spirit chose to work in them for the common good of the church.

We can summarize what Paul was teaching in these first few verses this way:

If you belong to Christ, you belong to the body.

The message is as true for us today as it was two-thousand years ago when this was written. If you belong to Christ, you belong to the body.

Before we dig deeper into this passage, may I ask all of you here today and all of you watching online a personal question? Do you belong to Christ?

A number of you will answer that question without hesitation and will say, “Yes! I belong to Christ!” You know that there was a time in your life when you did not belong to Christ, a time when you had not yet trusted in the saving work of Jesus. Whether that decision to turn away from rebellion and to turn in faith to Christ took place at age 5, age 15, or age 50, you know that you have been forgiven. You know that you have been converted, that the Holy Spirit now dwells within you, and that you truly belong to Jesus.

But perhaps on this Kickoff Sunday, God may be nudging others of you to kick off a new season of faith in Jesus Christ. Those of us who know his grace and forgiveness can tell you that belonging to Jesus is a game-changer. On the one hand, we can promise you that trusting in Christ is the best decision you will ever make.

And yet, in fairness, we should let you know that those who belong to Jesus will have their lives turned upside-down. I promise that’s a good thing, but fair warning, it also means that Jesus will be at work in every area of your life, including those that fall outside of God’s will for you. So again, I’ll ask you, “Do you belong to Christ?”

Now back to the rest of the passage. Our first takeaway is that if we belong to Christ, we belong to the body. What Paul does in the rest of this passage is to illustrate why it’s absurd to think that some Christians don’t belong to the body.

Paul first wanted his readers to see things from an outsider’s perspective. I’m going to read for us again verses 14-20.

Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body (1 Cor. 12:14-20, NIV).

As we mature in Christ, we come to understand that there is beauty in diversity and that variety is part of God’s design. But that’s not Paul’s point here. His concern was

that there were some Christians in Corinth who were made to feel inferior in comparison with their brothers and sisters in the Lord. They were noticing that some people had spiritual gifts that seemed to sparkle and others did not. As a result, some within the body were beginning to say to themselves, “I don’t belong.”

To those in the church who felt like outsiders, those who felt that they didn’t belong, Paul wanted to scream out, “You do belong! It doesn’t matter what part you are or what value some attach to certain parts and not to others. You belong to the body because you belong to Christ.”

In fact, notice again what it says in verse 18,

God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be (1 Cor. 12:18, NIV).

Is there any stronger statement to be made about belonging to the body than that God put you where he wants you? You belong to the body because you belong to Christ.

Of course, for every person who felt like an unnecessary appendage, there was someone else who proudly felt that they made the body what it was. Here’s how Paul described this incredibly self-centered attitude:

“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor. 12:21-26, NIV).

If there’s one thing most Americans wish they could change about their bodies it would be to lose some weight. If there were an easy way to shed some excess pounds that didn’t require diet and exercise, we would probably try it. It wouldn’t be easy, but one strategy you could take would be voluntary surgery. I mean, imagine what your bathroom scale might read if you had an arm or a leg surgically removed. I’m not recommending this course of action, but technically you would weigh less.

Paul wasn’t talking about surgical weight loss strategies in this passage, but the scenario he described would have sounded just as absurd as lopping off limbs in order to slim down.

The eye might think it can thrive without hands, but Paul assures his readers that it can't. In fact, in verse 22 and following, Paul said that some of the parts of our body, the parts we cover up for modesty's sake turn out to be rather essential according to God's design for procreation. (Moms and dads, I'll leave it to you to decide when and how to explain those verses to your kids).

Here's the point. We could sum up this whole passage in one simple phrase. Are you ready for it? I want you to write this down.

I need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs me.

Jot that down, underline it, circle it, and draw stars around it. You need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you.

You need the body of Christ. I need the body of Christ. We need the body of Christ.

Just as the individual parts of our body were not designed by God to survive and flourish independently of our human bodies, so too are we not designed by our creator to become *deeply devoted followers of Jesus* all by ourselves.

If you're trying to live out your Christian life apart from all these people, you're doing it wrong. If you look around the room and think, "I don't need any of these people to help me follow Jesus," then please refer back to verse 21. If the only Christians you think you need are the ones living under your roof, then think again.

You need the body of Christ. I need the body of Christ. We need the body of Christ.

But the other side of that coin is just as true.

The body of Christ needs me. The body of Christ needs you.

If what it says in verse 24 is true, that "God has put the body together," and if Paul is telling the truth in verse 18 that "God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be," then it's true that we as a church family will not flourish and grow *without you*.

The body of Christ needs you. The body of Christ needs me.

I said this last year on Kickoff Sunday, and probably the year before that, and probably the year before that. Here at our church, we don't want to put more things on your plate, we want to help you put better things on your plate. Let me explain.

If you're like me, you don't need more things on your plate. You've already got a full plate with family, school, work, and church. Add to that plate recreation,

relationships, and other responsibilities, and your plate starts to look like it does at Thanksgiving dinner. The last thing we want to do is to add more to your plate.

But...maybe there are things on your plate that shouldn't be there, things that aren't contributing to your spiritual health. Or maybe there are some good things on your plate, but perhaps there are some healthier substitutes.

On this Kickoff Sunday, let me quickly suggest three things that ought to be on your plate. I would suggest that these three things ought to be on your plate because you need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you.

First, because you need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you, **make sure there is plenty of room on your plate for corporate worship.**

Let's start to look at Sunday morning as members of one body rather than as independent parts. For example, even though we have a handful of folks up on the platform each week leading our music, did you know that all of us as the body of Christ contribute to leading worship when we gather together? Consider what it says in Colossians 3:15-16,

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts (Col. 3:15-16, NIV).

When there's too much on our plates, even good stuff, then there tends to be little room for the main course—Sunday morning worship. And when there's not enough room for the main course, then there is little opportunity for you to be with the body of Christ and for the body of Christ to be with you.

What things in your life right now are either crowding out the main course or worse, leading you to believe that you can get by without it?

Second, because you need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you, **make sure there is plenty of room on your plate for discipleship.**

Of course, there is much growth that does take place independently of the body. I hope that you are prioritizing personal times of prayer and meditation on God's word. But there needs to be some time in your week and space on your plate where you can do discipleship and grow in Christ with other members of the body.

One of the ministries we're emphasizing today as part of Kickoff Sunday is Life Groups. For those of you who are new to our church family, or for those who have not

yet joined a group, Life Groups are designed to be a place where we can *become deeply devoted followers of Jesus together* by learning together and by loving one another.

If you'll take out the Life Groups insert in your bulletin, you'll notice some key information about these groups. I won't take the time right now to walk through that sheet other than to let you know that these are what we call sermon-based small groups. The idea is that in a Life Group you'll have the opportunity to go deeper into what we're discovering from God's word on Sunday mornings.

On the reverse side of that sheet, you'll see our current Life Group schedule. We're hoping to add to that list in the future, but for now, those are the options available. Some of those times will fill up fast, so be sure to sign up as soon as possible where space is available. You can sign up in the Connection Cafe today, or you can let us know you're interested by visiting our Life Groups page on our website.

Finally, because you need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you, **make sure there is plenty of room on your plate for opportunities to serve one another.**

In this same chapter, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth about how they should be using their spiritual gifts. He explained to them in verse 7 that the Holy Spirit has gifted each and every believer so that he or she might use their gifts for the common good of the body of Christ. But knowing that our natural tendency is to make comparisons, Paul reminded this local body of believers that,

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work (1 Cor. 12:4-6, NIV).

In addition to joining us at noon for our Tailgate Taco lunch, I hope you'll take time after the service today to visit our Ministry Fair out in the Connection Cafe. You'll find lots of opportunities for spiritual growth and ways that you can use the gifts God has given you. Chat with some of our ministry leaders, ask questions about these various opportunities, and sign up to serve and use your gifts for God's glory.

Remember, You need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs you.

Let's pray and ask the Lord to help us kick off this new season of ministry here at E-Free Bemidji.