

Prayers

To God

We praise You God Almighty, because every force in the universe finds its power from You! You are behind everything and You are the ruler of the Universe! We long for the day when Satan's authority will be destroyed, and everything will be secured in Your love! But until then, achieve this victory for us in our daily lives we pray. AMEN

For myself

Pray that God will lead you to meet the right people as you go about your daily life, and in so doing, may His will be done on earth as it is on heaven!

For others

Pray for those who have difficulty expressing themselves to others. There are many conditions that hold people back, but some of them can be debilitating. Please pray for any you know who have such troubles.

Meditation

Jesus, You are there:

Dissatisfy my soul with mortal and material things,
excite me by the sheer potential of Your presence.

Jesus, stay close at hand:

Break through my joyless and mundane triviality,
serve me the delights of your eternal presence.

Jesus, keep nearby:

Cover me with safety and security when I travel,
consecrate my every journey with Your blessing.

Jesus, walk with me:

Lift my soul in spiritual delights even as we speak,
stir me by the wondrous power of unchanging truth.

Jesus, never leave me:

Melt my damaged heart by love's extreme simplicity,
restore my flagging spirit in bliss at Your forgiveness.

Bible Passage

1 Cor 12:12-26

¹² Just as the body is one even though it has many separate parts, so it is with Christ; all the individual parts of the body, though many, make up one body. ¹³ Indeed, we were all baptised in the one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all of us were filled with the one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body is not one part, but many. ¹⁵ If the foot were to say, 'Since I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' does this really mean it is not part of the body? ¹⁶ Or if the ear were to say, 'Since I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' does this really mean it is not part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would hearing take place? If the whole body were hearing, where would smelling take place? ¹⁸ But God has placed the parts in the body as He pleased, each one of them, ¹⁹ and if the whole was one part, what would become of the body?

²⁰ But as it is, there are many parts, and one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I do not need you.' ²² How much more important, then, are those parts of the body that seem to be weaker. ²³ We should give greater respect to those parts of the body we think less important and treat with greater modesty our less presentable parts, ²⁴ where those that are more presentable have no need of this.

God has put the body together giving the greater recognition to those parts in need of it, ²⁵ so that there may be no division in the body, but the parts may have the same concern for one another. ²⁶ So if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honoured, all the parts congratulate it.

Review

This passage has become fixed in the minds of God's people as one of the most powerful, if not beautiful descriptions of God's people, the church, in Scripture. It comes as 1 Corinthians takes a dramatic turn for the better. The first eleven chapters run through a series of church problems reported to Paul (immorality, lawsuits, marriage issues, food sacrificed to idols etc.), and contain his advice about these things. It is all fascinating, and as we read it, we are made to think carefully about the nature of God's Word, and how we apply it today. But at the heart of this letter is Paul's defence of the Gospel as first preached and the discipline of the Church universal. So in this passage, he offers us a powerful word-picture of the Church, as a '*body*' with many parts. Chapter 12 begins with Paul's famous list of the '*spiritual gifts*' given to all believers; but no individual stands alone in this world, and yet these gifts all have their place within the same '*body*' of Christ (12:12), as Paul now elaborates and takes the illustration a great deal further.

Individual parts - one body (12:12-13)

It is hard for us to imagine what it would have been like for the first Christians who lived alongside those who had known Jesus personally and could testify to what it meant to be with Him; but they were fundamentally a church of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says here '*we were all baptised in the one Spirit into one body ...*' (12:12). After the resurrection, the disciples were all confused at first (see Matthew 28:17, Mark 16:8), but were then filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). They discovered that the Holy Spirit was indeed Jesus 'with them', and God 'with them' as well! At first, their deeds and actions were 'as one' (see Acts 2:43-47, 4:32,33), but as the church's missionary work expanded, there was a danger that the Gospel message might become fragmented as it was taken in different directions across the Roman world.

Because of this, Paul knew he had to provide Christians in the churches he founded with a model of the church that helped them value not merely their own fellowship, but all God's people. He begins to do this in his famous introduction to the gifts; '*Now there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord; and there are different kinds of working, but it is the same God ...*' (12:4-6). But now he returns to this theme powerfully. I reckon that while Paul was writing about the spiritual gifts he thought he was doing no more than reminding Christians of what they already knew; yet we receive this as radical teaching! I am convinced that his main point was this one. All baptised people, filled with the '*one Spirit*', are one '*body*', even Christ Himself (12:12,13).

The relationship between body parts! (12:14-19)

The illustration Paul gives here is obvious, when looked at from the point of view of an individual. Each of us is acutely aware of the need for each of our body parts to function. Perhaps while we are young we presume a little on our bodies, but as we grow older we are often reminded of the importance of everything from a toe nail (it hurts badly when it grows wrongly) to the intricate working of each part of our face (teeth included!). So there are few who do not readily understand Paul's main point here in this paragraph. Having given examples of body parts that cannot function separately even with a first century view of the human body, i.e.

the foot, the hand, the ear and the eye, and eventually the nose (12:15-17), Paul states the point strongly; *'But God has placed the parts in the body as He pleased, each one of them, and if the whole was one part, what would become of the body?'* (12:18,19).

Looking at these two verses carefully, they tell us a couple of important things about the 'body' which is Christ, and which is the church. First, like all 'bodies' and everything on earth, it is made by God, according to His will. The point is well made to the Corinthians who were in the middle of squabbling about leadership rights, the relevance of the Gospel as preached by Paul, and the death of Christ (1 Cor 1,2). In effect, Paul says without reserve; 'the church you see is God's design and He has done it'. Something similar is true of the second point, which is another message to the Corinthian church. When Paul says, *'if the whole was one part, what would become of the body?'* (12:19), he is not just warning against divisions in the church. He is firmly warning the Corinthians against assuming that of themselves, they are complete as a church. They represent Christ to the city of Corinth, but not to the world, and they are a part of Christ's body, not all of it. Paul's point begs huge questions of any church about its relationship with other churches and Christians across the globe.

Weaker parts, and modesty (12:20-24)

If what Paul has said so far is about 'belonging', then verses 20-21 are a message against arrogance; no part of the church can dispense with another as if it is not required. There are indeed *'many parts and one body'* (12:20), but each one does not merely belong, it has a function, whether seen, or appreciated, or not; there is no room for arrogance, as in, *'the eye cannot say to the hand "I do not need you" ...'* (12:21). But this just prepares us for what comes next, which is about the honour and appearance of the parts of the 'body'.

First, Paul draws attention to what he describes as the 'weaker' parts of the body (12:22). But we hit a translation problem, for it seems that by 'weaker', Paul has something different in mind than a small part of the body such as a big toe, or perhaps a small part of the church such as a tiny congregation. He continues, *'We should give greater respect to those parts of the body we think less important and treat with greater modesty our less presentable parts ...'* (12:23). What are these *'less important parts'* which need our *'respect'*? What are the *'less presentable parts'* we must treat with *'greater modesty'*? In terms of bodies, the message is clear enough; we must not take even the smallest parts of the body for granted and should value and look after them all the more. Moreover, the *'less presentable parts'* are perhaps reproductive organs, which both the Bible and society in general prefer us to keep hidden despite their importance.

What then does this all say about the church? I reckon that Paul is offering a message about the godliness of the unsung heroes of the church, perhaps those who administer its affairs, or those whose hospitality and generosity is often not regarded as 'front line Gospel work', but which is essential for effective apostolic and evangelistic mission. I also reckon that the *'less presentable parts'* in verse 23 are open for us to interpret. I suggest for example that much crucial pastoral work is never heralded as core to the Gospel and effective mission, even though many will never respond to the Gospel call without such 'behind the scenes' care.

No division in the body!

You may perhaps have noticed that I have ended up illustrating Paul's point with reference to the local church, when earlier, I pointed out that Paul was talking about the wider church universal, and this is how we must end our study today! Each church of whatever kind and in whatever place, should develop a healthy approach to partnership in the furtherance of the Gospel with other churches, so that the 'Body' of Christ in this world is 'one', as seen by those to whom we seek to bring the message of the Gospel. So, Paul's last point here is that each part of the 'body' of Christ must have a just and appropriate *'concern for one another'* (12:25), so that, *'if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it ...'* (12:26).

It may not cross our minds today, but although the passage ends with a further comment about respect, honour and congratulation (12:26), Paul's mention of suffering should not go un-noticed. The church of God was about to undergo a severe period of persecution, as the church has done at various times and in various places throughout history. One of the reasons we should always seek to honour Paul's vision *'that there may be no division in the body'* (12:24) is that when Christians are persecuted in the world, we must stand by them, whatever we think about their spirituality, religious practices and some of their beliefs. This powerful passage has much to teach us today.

Discipleship

Application

Being the 'Body of Christ' in a local church

The unity of God's people spoken of here by Paul is a wondrous thing, that is, where it exists. The fact is that it remains an aspiration, and we are wise to remember that although we give ascent to this picture because it is scriptural, many a Christian fellowship is riven with problems and divisions, and something far less than care for its other parts. Behind the scenes, the values of the world creep in to our practice, and the unity of the body is more like an ideal for the local church let alone the church universal.

One key example of this is the way in which Satan tempts people to be critical of others not to their faces but to others. Jesus required His disciples to reject this way of handling divisions, yet people still do it, and divisions fester when people do not follow Jesus' advice; which is that if you have a problem with your brothers or sisters, then speaks to them (Matthew 18:18f.). A church community that is like Paul's great picture of the body is one where there is humility one before the other, and all are connected in Christ, know this and respect this. In such circumstances, the Gospel may be reached with power!

Being the body of Christ universally

Paul's words ask each Christian community to know its place within the whole body of Christ, through which God works throughout the world. This cannot be accomplished if people who attend one church only attend this and no other church fellowship or community. We learn a great deal when we share in fellowship with others, and there is no shame in being a Christian church that does not do what others do; the question is not abstract it is practical. Are we doing what God requires of us?

One church may indeed be a church where young people gather, and another where people of one ethnic origin find fellowship. But how does this relate to those who worship in other more traditional ways within any place or town? The church cannot stand merely on the rebellious foundation of rejecting what previous generations have done in worship or Gospel service. Surely the message of this passage of Scripture remains this; whichever church rejects the other rejects the Body of Christ.

Ideas for what to do

- *Yet again, I ask you to consider the issue of your own attitude towards Christian unity and the body of Christ. This time, I ask you to consider this text closely and try to work out whether you feel that you are comfortable with the way that your own church fellowship demonstrates 'the body of Christ', both in and beyond itself.*
- *Continue to pray for Christian unity and the various means whereby God's people are trying to give form and structure to the message of the Gospel today.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about the church and about Christian fellowship?*
2. *What does more damage to the church, attitudes of superiority or of inferiority?*
3. *To what may we liken the different parts of the body of Christ?*

Final Prayer

When You say a word, may we hear You, Lord. When You touch our hearts, may we feel You, Lord. When You lead the way, may we follow You, Lord. When You inspire us, may we respond to You, Lord. May all our lives be lived in response to Your calling, Lord Jesus. AMEN