

**IN HOW YOU SERVE GOD****1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31**

One afternoon while walking through a hospital, a pastor by the name of Hugh Litchfield heard his name being called from across the lobby. As a man approached, he asked; "Hi, Pastor, remember me?" About 10 years earlier this young man had visited the church where Litchfield was serving. He was facing possible jail time over tax violations. This had led to alcohol dependency, which jeopardized his marriage and his relationship with his children. His life was in a desperate shape. "I want to thank you," he said to Litchfield. "For what?" "One Sunday you preached a sermon about taking responsibility for our lives, not to blame what we become on somebody else. God used that sermon to speak to me. That afternoon I got down on my knees and prayed to God and promised to take responsibility for my life. With God's help, I did. Since that time, life has been great. I got out of trouble with the IRS. I got a grip on my alcoholism. My marriage is better than ever. I want to thank you."

Litchfield was overwhelmed by what was told. When he went back to his office, he dug out that old sermon. Early in his ministry, on Monday mornings, he would jot down a phrase or two at the top of his sermon manuscript as to how he felt the sermon had gone on Sunday. Litchfield saw what he himself had written about that specific sermon: "Dead in the water! No one listened! A waste of time!" Litchfield learned something that day. If we offer faithfully to God what we have, somehow it will be used in magnificent ways. We must never underestimate what God will do with what we give. Only eternity will fully reveal all the results of serving God.

We're going to look at God's Word as it's found in 1 Corinthians 12 today as we continue our study of this important part of the New Testament – Paul's first letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. My title for this series is "In Whatever You Do: Discovering What It Means To Glorify God." It's based on what I believe is the key verse for the whole letter: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31 NLT) Paul was convinced we're called to glorify God in everything: every situation, every circumstance, every task, and every relationship. The Corinthian Christians were by all means born again, sincere followers of Jesus, but they were also spiritually ignorant and immature. So, Paul had his hands full in helping them figure out what it meant to follow Jesus well and glorify God in every way.

Chapter 12 is about how we serve God. In a couple of weeks, we'll reflect on chapter 14. We learn there that the Corinthians were fascinated by and fixated on the spiritual gift of tongues in an unhealthy way when they got together to worship God. We'll talk about why that was the case when we get there. But that issue is an important background in understanding chapter 12. These Christians in Corinth had so overvalued and overemphasized the gift of tongues that other gifts, ministries, and abilities – and the fellow believers who possessed them - were being ignored, pushed aside, and made to feel like they had nothing important to contribute. Of course, serving God - whatever we do to help build God's Kingdom - is most definitely a place

where we should glorify God, right? Absolutely! That's the transferable concept or truth we want to drill down on today. Serving the Lord didn't begin and end in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. That's certainly a very important part of what it means to follow Jesus today. So, what can we learn from 1 Corinthians 12? First, the privilege of serving God is given to us...

### **BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

The Bible makes it clear that receiving the Holy Spirit into your human spirit is a very big deal. In fact, it's the most important factor in being a Christian. Receiving the Holy Spirit is what makes you a child of God. It's not baptism, or taking Communion, or joining a church, or coming forward to accept Jesus as your Savior. It's getting God's Spirit into your spirit. The Bible says, "Remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.... For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." (Rom. 8:11, 14 NLT) That's precisely what Paul was getting at when he says here, "But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:13 NLT) You and I become members of the Body of Christ – not by being immersed in water – but by being immersed in the Holy Spirit. Converted. Saved. Born again. That happens when we receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, then, determines and controls who receives which abilities to serve God. That's said clearly twice in this chapter. "It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.... But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it." (1 Cor. 12:11, 18 NLT) Sometimes they're called spiritual gifts. But they can also be ministries, activities, abilities or even manifestations of different kinds. The Holy Spirit gives them out to all God's children – every follower of Jesus. When? Apparently, right when you're born again, although most of us don't discover how the Holy Spirit has gifted us until a bit later in our spiritual journey. Often we need to discover and develop them.

If the Holy Spirit sovereignly decides who gets which gifts, then, boasting about my spiritual gifts or jealousy over others' gifts is always wrong. You didn't choose the ways God has equipped you to serve Him. They were selected and implanted in you by the Holy Spirit. It's ridiculous, then, to ever think, "Wow, God gave me a gift of teaching or leadership. I'm better and more important than other Christians!" You had nothing to do with it! But it's just as foolish to think, "Why couldn't I have been born with a great singing voice or have the ability to organize some great ministry? I mustn't matter to God very much." Paul asks in this chapter, "Why is your foot a foot and your hand a hand? Because it pleased God the great Designer to make it so." Your hand can't take pride in being a hand any more than your foot should be ashamed to be your foot! God loves each of us the same, but He's gifted us differently. The important thing is to find out how the Holy Spirit has gifted you and start using those abilities to glorify God. Secondly, the privilege of serving God is given to us...

### **WITH GREAT VARIETY.**

This was an all-important truth they overlooked at the church in Corinth. Because they'd gotten fixated on the gift of tongues, they'd devalued all the other ways God wants to use His people to serve Him. Let's hear now what Paul wrote to them. (12:1-14, 27-31). Paul reminds us of something about God we should never forget. God loves variety including in the spiritual abilities He's given us. For example, consider the variety of flowers and animals God has made. People have different personalities, interests, and abilities on just a natural level. God's love for variety is also revealed in how the Holy Spirit hands out spiritual gifts. Yes, the very same Holy Spirit lives in you who lives in me. Nevertheless, you don't have my gifts and I don't have your abilities. The Christians in Corinth resisted this reality. They began to believe everyone should have the same spiritual gift – tongues – and that some spiritual gifts – especially tongues – were more important than others. As a result, some of them began to feel superior to others while others probably felt inferior or unspiritual.

Paul went out of his way to stress there are many different ways to serve God, but they all come through the same God. All are to be acknowledged and valued. All have their place. All are important. All can be effectively used to serve God and glorify Him. Twenty centuries later followers of Jesus still need to grow in appreciation for the many, different ways God uses His people. I grew up in a Pentecostal church where tongues and other manifestations of the Holy Spirit were highly prized. Sadly, being able to teach the Bible or manage a ministry well was shrugged off as kind of second rate. My whole ministry has been in evangelical Baptist churches where Bible preaching and teaching is highly prized, but the value of ecstatic or supernatural gifts has been downplayed. During this pandemic, I've grown in my appreciation for people with aptitude in technology because we're really dependent on them right now. We don't always value those with creative, artistic, or mechanical giftings as much as we should or we just don't think of those abilities as being truly spiritual or Holy Spirit inspired.

I hear Paul saying here that everyone is given some ability with which to serve God, but no one is given everything. We Christians differ from each other in many ways both naturally and spiritually. That should be expected and valued. We don't all need to have exactly the same spiritual experiences nor do we need to serve in exactly the same ways. Our unity is found in the Holy Spirit who gave us those abilities. Paul's great illustration of this truth here is the human body. It's made up of many different parts doing very different things but all those parts have the same purpose or goal – to provide you with the essential tool of your physical body – so you can live a productive, happy life. Every part of your body contributes something important to your body's function, but no part does everything. It's the same in the Body of Christ.

Here's another way to say it. Diversity in the Body of Jesus Christ is not only acceptable, it's essential. "All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it." (1 Cor. 12:27 NLT) Just like your physical body can't work properly if all the parts are hands or all the parts are eyes or some parts refuse to function and do their appointed task, so the diversity God has designed for the Body of Christ is essential. Only a very strange, abnormal body would be made up of only one part – everything

being an ear, a kidney, a foot, a bone, or a blood vein. No, a normal body is one entity made up of many, diverse parts. In the same way, only a very strange, abnormal church would manifest only one kind of Holy Spirit enabled manifestation. Imagine everyone at KRBC being musically gifted, but no one could teach the Bible, or work with kids, or fix stuff that breaks down. Or imagine everyone at KRBC being called to preach, but no one was gifted to lead a discipleship triad, or organize a ministry and help it succeed, or share with lost people how to begin a relationship with God.

Each of us have a unique combination of spiritual abilities – probably more than one. In addition those gets expressed through our personality type and are colored by different life experiences along the way. You are completely unique and one of a kind. So am I. God made you like no one else and gifted you like no one else. Don't waste your time and energy complaining about what you may not have been given by the Holy Spirit. Instead, get busy discovering and using whatever God gave you for His glory. God has specific areas of ministry He wants you to be involved in right here at our church. He doesn't ask any of us to do everything. Instead, He calls and equips each of us to do something – something that you are gifted and qualified to do.

There's a TV ad that features a young musician playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. As his hands fly over the keys, a statement is projected, "A piano has 88 keys" then, "Each one is different." After a few moments, we see "But what if they were all the same?" With that the pianist switches to an identical piano and continues to play. However, regardless of what key he strikes, every note on the new piano is the same—a middle C. He alternates between the two pianos until the final frame where we read this message: "Be together, not the same." That's the message of the New Testament when it comes to the church, the Body of Christ. Be together, not the same. Each person is different. Each person is given a "note" to play in the grand song of building the church. Now, thirdly, the privilege of serving God is given to us...

## **TO SERVE GOD'S PEOPLE.**

I really like how Paul wrote about this subject in another NT letter he wrote, "Why is it that He gives us these abilities to do certain things best? It is that God's people will be equipped to do better work for Him, building up the church, the body of Christ, to a position of strength and maturity." (Eph. 4:12 LB) The Holy Spirit didn't give you spiritual abilities to build up your ego. Those gifts aren't your personal hobbies or possessions to do with as you please. These abilities are God's tools to bless, meet the needs of, and build up His people spiritually.

The Corinthian Christians had either forgotten this central truth or were ignorant of it. They made the Holy Spirit's gifts a matter of feeling superior to others and showing off. But the Holy Spirit always intended the abilities He gave us to be used to serve others. The goal is to build up the congregation as a whole. If you think all it means to be Jesus' follower is to attend a worship service occasionally either online or in person, to pray only when you're giving thanks for your food, or to send a few dollars to the church now and then, you're missing out on so much! God wants to put you to work – to

employ you - in the work of His Kingdom through this congregation. I also believe God wants you to see your place of work, your neighborhood, your network of family and friends – some of them with no relationship with Jesus yet – as your mission field. Any and every place can become a place where you serve King Jesus through the use of your spiritual gifts and help to build His Kingdom in people’s lives.

God equips and uses every believer to serve Him. There it is in black and white in our text today, “A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.” (1 Cor. 12:7) It is possible for someone who doesn’t follow, love, or know Jesus to have a spiritual gift? No. He or she doesn’t have the Holy Spirit living in him or her. They can have natural talents in great abundance, for sure, but not spiritual gifts. But the Bible makes it clear right here that every believer has received at least one – and probably several – Holy Spirit-enabled abilities to serve God. You don’t have to be a pastor to serve God, or a full-time missionary, or be on staff at a church to serve the Lord. It’s easy to assume people who get paid to do ministry are the only ones who are expected to carry it out. Wrong! One of my greatest roles as your pastor - and this is also true of Aimee, Todd, Kari, Ashby, Beth, and Carole (our other church staff members) - is to help you discover your gifts, equip you to use your gifts, and provide the opportunity – in other words, the time and the place – to put your gifts to work for the Lord here at KRBC. I realize all of us are feeling a bit limited right now due to the pandemic. Well, continue to ask God to show you ways to use your gifts for His glory – even new ways. And be patient. This time of isolation from each other will end. I hope you come back energized and ready to serve God by serving His people!

Let’s remember something very important. It’s my responsibility to discover, develop, and use my gifts to help build God’s Kingdom. When you stand before Jesus one day to give an account to Him of how you invested and used the abilities the Holy Spirit gave to you, any excuses won’t hold up then. You won’t be able to say, “Pastor Rick never asked me to do anything. My church, KRBC, never invited me to use my spiritual gifts.” If you’re content to remain ignorant of your God-given abilities or just never get around to using them, that’s on you. It’s not on me. It’s not on this church. God will hold you accountable. But I hope and pray it will never come to that for you or me. Believe me, one of the great discoveries and adventures in life as a follower of Jesus is discovering the person God made you to be, figuring out your spiritual job description, and then experiencing with great joy the impact God wants you to have for His Kingdom. Finally, the privilege of serving God is given to us...

### **TO BE DEMONSTRATED IN LOVE AT ALL TIMES.**

Let’s read the rest of our text today. (12:15-26). Paul personified some of our human body parts and imagined absurd conversations among them to make his point. He wrote implicitly here about a subject he will write about explicitly in the very next chapter - chapter 13. Love. Showing love is greater than all the spiritual gifts. By the same token, how we serve God by serving others is best demonstrated through love. For example, love never elevates one ability or gift over others. Love never tears down the

value of any Holy Spirit enabled and produced ability either. Love never makes one follower of Jesus feel important at the expense of someone else. Love creates unity among followers of Jesus by appreciating the contributions of all. Love never says, "I don't need you. I don't need what the Holy Spirit has put into you." Love rejoices in the rich diversity of spiritual gifts God has given His people and is never threatened by variety. Sure, we're all different. Just like the parts of the human body, some of us might have up front and very visible gifts while others are more behind the scenes and hidden abilities. But all gifts matter.

Paul exhorted those Corinthian Christians to care for one another because they're all part of the same spiritual body. The parts of the Body of Christ work together just like the human body. Our eyes and ears don't just serve themselves, but the whole body. Our hands don't just feed and defend themselves, but the whole body. Our heart doesn't just supply blood to itself, but serves the whole body. Come to think of it there can sometimes be a part of the human body that only lives to serve itself. It doesn't contribute anything to the rest of the body. Everything it gets it uses exclusively to feed and grow itself. Do you know what that is? We call it cancer.

Love shares in the joys and sorrows of one another. Just like your whole body rejoices when your heart keeps pumping out blood or your lungs keep on pumping out air, we rejoice when our brothers and sisters serve God and us with excellence and dedication. When one does well, we all do well. But just like your whole body suffers when you have a toothache or hit your thumb with a hammer, we also suffer for and with one another. When one hurts, we all hurt. You know what Paul was describing? Love. "This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad." (1 Cor. 12:25-26 NLT) Something else. Love is always eager and willing to serve – to keep on giving when you're not being noticed or praised, to keep on using those gifts the Holy Spirit put into us without reservation, and to keep on serving when it means personal sacrifice of some kind. That's how Jesus loves you and me, isn't it? And when the Holy Spirit fills us with His love, we begin to love people, to serve God, and to serve His people like Jesus does.

On December 4, 2017, 400 musicians gathered in the 23rd Street Armory of Philadelphia to perform "Symphony for a Broken Orchestra" by David Lang. It was written as part of a project to repair more than 1,000 damaged instruments that had been in storage because of severe budget cuts to Philadelphia's public school music programs. The orchestra included amateurs, professionals, and even members of the storied Philadelphia Orchestra. It included a 9-year-old cellist and, an 82-year-old oboist. It might have been the most diverse orchestra in America. The 400 musicians brought with them broken instruments: a trumpet held together with blue painter's tape, a violin with no A string, a cello carried in multiple pieces. Because funding for music programs in public schools had been cut, many school instruments fell into disrepair. As the musical piece opened many of the instruments were silent, but gradually they found their voices. Some of the musicians struggled with their instruments - like a clarinetist who could get out only short spurts of sound and a French horn player who

kept losing his mouthpiece. But together, the orchestra produced rich harmony. The music was playful and joyous. As the performance wound down each section bowed out one-by-one, until all that remained was the humble squeal of a broken clarinet.

In this or in any church, we all resemble broken musical instruments. Broken by sin. Broken by loss. Broken by living in a world in rebellion against God. Nevertheless, together we are still God's orchestra and we can still produce a wonderful and joyful song of praise as we are led by the hand of our Conductor: Jesus Himself. Through and by Him we are enabled to glorify God in how we serve God.