

The Imperfect Church – 23
The Serving Church
1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Introduction

Over the years, I have been 'privileged' to take countless personality tests. For different roles and positions I've held, I have been psychologically poked and prodded over and over. While many of these tests involved insane numbers of questions, there was one that was rather short and sweet. It was called the "Oreo Test." Basically, it claims that the way you eat an Oreo cookie says something about your personality.

Let's see if it works. [How do you like to eat your Oreos?](#)

[Pick one of the following options:](#)

[The whole thing at once.](#)

[One bite at a time.](#)

[Dunked in milk.](#)

[Twisted apart.](#)

[I don't like Oreo cookies.](#)

Here's what your choice says about you:

The whole thing - This means you consume life with abandon, you are fun to be with, exciting and carefree with some hint of recklessness. You are totally irresponsible. No one should trust you with their children.

One bite at a time - You are lucky to be one of the 5.4 billion other people who eat their Oreos this very same way. Just like them, you lack imagination, but that's okay, you're normal.

Dunked - Everyone likes you because you are always upbeat. You like to sugar coat unpleasant experiences and rationalize bad situations into good ones. You are in total denial about the shambles you call a life.

Twisted apart - You have a highly curious nature. You take pleasure in breaking things apart to find out how they work, though not always able to put them back together, so you destroy all the evidence of your activities. You deny your involvement when things go wrong.

I don't like Oreo cookies - You probably come from a rich family, like to wear nice things and go to upscale restaurants. You are particular and fussy about the things you buy, own, and wear. Things have to be just right. There's just no pleasing you.

TS – We are all different, unique in our own ways. And that differentness can do one of two things...divide us, or unite us. That is what Paul gets after next as we walk through 1 Corinthians. As he has already started us on the path of spiritual gifts, he now solidifies his plea for unity in the Church:

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a - ¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

²⁷ All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it. ²⁸ Here are some of the parts God has appointed for the church:

first are apostles,
second are prophets,
third are teachers,
then those who do miracles,
those who have the gift of healing,
those who can help others,
those who have the gift of leadership,
those who speak in unknown languages.

²⁹ Are we all apostles? Are we all prophets? Are we all teachers? Do we all have the power to do miracles? ³⁰ Do we all have the gift of healing? Do we all have the ability to speak in unknown languages? Do we all have the ability to interpret unknown languages? Of course not! ³¹ So you should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts.

As we walk through this text for the next few minutes together, we will see that Paul will weave together several of his previous arguments regarding various issues, to boil things down to these truths about the Church:

1. WE ARE ONE (V. 12-13)
2. WE ARE MANY (V. 14-17)
3. WE ARE NEEDED (V. 18-21)
4. WE ARE UNITED (V. 22-27)
5. WE ARE SERVANTS (V. 28-31)

TS – Let’s walk through these together:

1. WE ARE ONE

In 12:4-7, Paul said, “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.” With a focus on both the diversity of gifts, and the unity they are to bring, he will now flesh out both of those truths.

v. 12 – “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body.” He appeals to this organic image that we all understand. Your body has around 100 trillion unique cells, 206 bones, 600 muscles, 78 organs, 100,000 individual hairs on your head, and 9,000 taste buds. Though your body is comprised of thousands and thousands of different and unique parts, all of them work together to comprise one functioning and healthy body. This is Paul’s point...end of v. 12 – “so it is with the body of Christ.” While he is obviously making reference to what the Church is and how it is to function, that phrase literally translates, “so it is with Christ.” In using that phrase in particular, Paul is establishing a clear link between us and Christ. The Church is not just a body of Christians...it is the body of Christ.

David Prior – “In order to accomplish his work on earth, Jesus had a body made of flesh and blood. In order to accomplish his work today, Jesus has a body that consists of living human beings.”¹

William Barclay – “Christ is no longer in this world in the body; therefore, if he wants a task done within the world, he has to find someone to do it. If he wants a child taught, he has to find a teacher who will teach that child; if he

¹ David Prior, [*The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 210.

wants a sick person cured, he has to find a physician or surgeon to do his work; if he wants his story told, he has to find someone to tell it. Literally, we have to be the body of Christ, hands to do his work, feet to run upon his errands, a voice to speak for him...Here is the supreme glory of the Christian—every Christian is part of the body of Christ upon earth.”²

In the Church, Christ’s literal and physical representation on the Earth, we are to find our identity and functionality in something we already know to be true with our physical bodies...though we are many, we are one. In v. 13 he theologically drives that point home. V. 13 – “Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free.” Those who place their trust in Christ come from all imaginable backgrounds. Backgrounds that tend to divide and separate people into little camps of people just like them.

Rich/poor/middle-class, black/white/Latino/Asian, white collar/blue collar, new car/used car, young/old, Democrat/Republican. You name it, and we can find a way to divide over it. Not so in the Church. End of v. 13 – “But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.” Those who comprise the Church, those who have trusted in Christ, have all undergone an experience that brings us all together. We have all be immersed into the Church (stepped out of the world and into God’s Kingdom). And we all have the same Holy Spirit living within us (lit. given the Spirit to drink). That event, our baptism (into Christ and, therefore, into his Church) supersedes all that could divide.

Galatians 3:26-28 – ²⁶ For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:10-11 - ¹⁰ Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. ¹¹ In this new life, it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

Baptism washes away all the prejudice, all the hatred, all the bitterness, all the jealousy, all the categories, all the cliques. In Christ, we are one. But lest we misunderstand and begin to think that being one means all being the same, he continues.

² William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 133–134.

2. WE ARE MANY

v. 14 – Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. Oneness is important, but so is variety. And he makes this point with a vivid illustration of pretending our body parts could talk. What if the foot says, “Wow, the hand is really important. I’m just a lowly, stinky foot. I guess I’m not really part of this body.” Or what if the ear says, “All I hear are people saying how pretty the eyes are. I’m just sick of it. What about me? Can’t ears be pretty too? I guess I’m not part of the body.” That’s not logical. All these various body parts are critical.

v. 17 – If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? Good points. As gross and weird as a body made up of only one big part would be, a Church made up of just one part is just as bad. It isn’t really a body.

Though at times we may think (never say, because it makes us sound arrogant) that the world would be a better place if everyone just: looked/sounded/believed/voted/drove/parented/lived/worked like me, it just isn’t true. That’s never been true and will never be true. There is only one person who lived perfectly and who is the example for all to follow...and it’s not you. The Church needs all kinds, all backgrounds, all gifts.

-A Church with only the gift of mercy would be a place where a lot of people would be helped, but not a lot of people would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

-A Church with only the gift of teaching would be a great place to learn truth, but a terrible place to learn humility.

-A Church with only the gift of leadership might help people follow you, but may prevent you from really following Jesus.

-A Church with only the gift of tongues may sound important and impressive, but it would be utter chaos as no one knew what was being said.

-A Church with only the gift of evangelism will reach a lot of people for Christ, but they would all remain immature in their faith.

A Church all like just one of us is no church at all. It is a bland, boring, lame excuse for one. God has designed to bring all peoples together, no matter their background, gift them in various ways, and make them into his one body. And in countless ways now, due to the uniqueness of each of us, we get to love him, serve him, and represent him in ways we could never have done on our own. Notice how he says it in v. 27 – all of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it. Together...each. We are all one, but we are comprised of unique individuals...better together.

3. WE ARE NEEDED

v. 18-21 - ¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

Regardless of the gift you have, it is important. First and foremost, because God has personally assigned it to you. So any form of jealousy over someone else's gifts, bitterness or resentment at them, or insecurity over your own gifts, have absolutely no place in the Church. To wish you had a different gift is to declare God got it wrong. To be insecure about your own gift is to be arrogant, thinking you know better than God. To resent another for their gifts undermines the very foundation of how the Church is supposed to function.

We all need each other. Again, specifically in Corinth, those with the more showy gifts (speaking in tongues) were being elevated over those with other gifts. Perhaps this is what they were saying to each other...I don't need you. Those up front, those in charge, those who speak before groups of others, are no more important than anyone else. They shouldn't be viewed as being more important, and they should never view themselves that way.

Romans 12:3 – ³ Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: 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.

Paul is certainly referencing this division in the Church in Corinth here in chapter 12. The head and the eyes cannot say to the hands and feet, "I don't need you." Head and eyes are pretty prominent positions. Hands and feet aren't. No one gets to look down upon, ignore, or belittle, anyone else. We all need one another.

- You may not have the gift of giving, but you need those who do to challenge your own level of generosity.
- You may not have the gift of mercy, but you need them to help your own heart grow in compassion and grace.
- You may not have the gift of teaching, but you need them to help you learn more of what God says in the Bible.
- You may not have the gift of evangelism, but you need them to remind you the lost matter to God and should matter to you.

-You may not have the gift of administration, but you need them to ensure everything in the Church is organized and not chaos.

William Barclay continues, "In the foreground, the preacher and the teacher hold the limelight; but they could never do their work at all unless in the background there were those who shouldered responsibility for the routine day-today administration. There are parts of the body which are never seen but which have a function more important than any other; there are those who serve the Church in ways that win no publicity, but without whose service the Church could not go on."³

So no matter what gift you have, it is needed. This Church needs you. Everyone in this room needs you. You may have spent your entire life hearing the opposite of that. You may believe the opposite of that. But the unchanging truth of the everlasting Word of God is this: we need you. So utilize whatever gift you have for the sake of the body around you.

Romans 12:4-8 - ⁴ Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

⁶ In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. ⁷ If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸ If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

4. WE ARE UNITED

Though he has already established the clear truth that we are one, he now shows a distinct consequence of that truth. And to do so, he flips our common experience on its head, and shows us the upside-down way of the Church.

v. 22-24 - ²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 136-137.

such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity.

Typically, we think that those parts of the body that are exposed for the world to see are the most important parts. And typically we think that those parts of the body that are a bit shameful and are to be hidden from the public are the least important parts. In fact, he gets specific so we don't have to try to figure out what he means. In v. 23 when he says "the parts we regard as less honorable" he uses a combination of words that form a euphemism for genitalia. Obviously these are the parts of the human body we always cover, we don't expose to the public, and ones we take extra precaution to protect. Paul's point is this...those typically understood to be less honorable are actually more so. Why? Because we take extra care, extra precaution, to ensure they privacy and protection.

So, he says, God has intentionally put the Church together in this way. Those who are viewed as less important, as less honorable, as less prestigious, are actually never less than anything or anyone. The strong are not more important than the weak. In fact, if he has stressed anything over the last several chapters, the strong are to help and accommodate the weak.

David Garland – "The church is not to be like its surrounding society, which always honors those who are already honored. It is to be countercultural and bestow the greatest honor on those who seem to be negligible."⁴

Why is this so? Because if this wasn't the case for the Church, it would be no different than the world...the wealthy, the popular, the cool, the pretty...they would rule in the Church just like they do everywhere else. But the Church is not to be like the world. The Church is the one place where everyone is valued equally. Where everyone is needed. Where everyone is one. Notice what Paul says this accomplishes, this elevating of the weak and un-honored...v. 25 – **this makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other.** Literally translates as "this makes for non-division among you."

5. WE ARE SERVANTS

In the last section here Paul makes another list of gifts and positions. And like the one previous in chapter 12, and like the others in the NT, it is not exhaustive. When he says first, second, and third, he isn't necessarily

⁴ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 596.

ranking them in terms of importance. He is ranking them in terms of time. Ephesians 2 says the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. Why? They came first. They are the ones God called to start this thing. The rest of the gifts came later. There is really only one clear point to be made from the list of gifts...speaking in tongues comes last. As it did in the earlier list in 12:10. Paul is making the subtle point to those who have elevated that gift over the others...you aren't as important as you think you are.

v. 29-30 - **29 Are we all apostles? Are we all prophets? Are we all teachers? Do we all have the power to do miracles? 30 Do we all have the gift of healing? Do we all have the ability to speak in unknown languages? Do we all have the ability to interpret unknown languages? Of course not!**

Again, though we are one, we are many. We are not all the same. We do not all have the same gift. There are faith groups that say there is one gift all Christians have, and it is the gift that marks when you received the Holy Spirit. And just like the Corinthians, they have elevated the gift of tongues to an unbiblical position. There is no one gift that identifies Christians. I've been made to feel inferior, and been told to my face that I do not possess the Holy Spirit because I do not speak in tongues. And that seems unfortunate...I'd really like to have Him in my life. Do all have one gift...of course not!

Notice this last phrase, and we will end with this...v. 31 – **So you should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts.** "Earnestly desire" is the Greek verb *ze/los* where we get zealous or jealous. It refers to passionate pursuit. So Paul ends this fantastic text with a call to chase after, to pursue, to be zealous for the gifts that will be most helpful? Why? Because at the end of the day, we are all servants. That's why we have been given spiritual gifts...to serve. God has put us all here together, as one body from various backgrounds with various gifts, all for the purpose of serving one another.