

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:20-31

### INTRODUCTION

We live in an age when we hear a number of complaints that we have lost all sense of community spirit. In our changing world we have lost that neighbourliness that many of you will remember from the past. We are increasingly living in an individualistic world where people focus on self rather than on the community.

In many ways Britain prides itself on its individualism. Individualism is appealing to our self-centred age because it appeals to our human nature. By nature we tend to be selfish and therefore we tend to do our own thing without any serious consideration of others. As a society we shun all attempts to make us responsible **to** others or **for** others.

The idea today that we are basically self-sufficient and we do not need anyone else's help is a lie it comes from the devil himself. God has made us in such a way that we are interdependent on one another that is why God placed us in families and communities. We need those robust relationships with other people in our places of work, at home and within our society.

This is why living on our own can be so difficult and leads to loneliness and sometimes depression. We are made for and we need community life. Now individualism has increasingly crept into the church over the last couple of decades. We sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that because Christ is sufficient then we do not need anyone else to help us live the Christian life or to worship God.

The idea that "I do not need to go to church to worship God I can do it at home on my own" is what individualism is all about. But this idea completely contradicts Scripture. God has made us and redeemed us not only for him but also for each other. We would never have heard the gospel if it wasn't for others. We would never have grown as Christians if it weren't for others that God has brought into our lives.

This is why God places converted people into communities they are called churches, we are never meant to go it alone as Christians, we need one another.

Now in this chapter that we are looking at Paul deals with two primary reasons why Christians fail to be involved in church life. Some feel they have no gifts or abilities that are worthwhile and so they feel inferior and as a result they sit back and let others do the work those are the believers described in verses 15-17. We looked at that sort of thinking last week. However there were others in the church at Corinth who felt superior, they felt they had all the gifts needed for the church to function and therefore they do not need the help or gifts or ministries of others. Those are the believers described in v 21 that we will consider further now. This approach stopped others from getting involved in church ministry, as such superior attitudes tend to dominate church life and discourage others from being involved.

### 1. WE BELONG TO ONE ANOTHER AND NEED ONE ANOTHER (vs. 21-27)

Last week we discovered that each person in the church is unique, distinctive irreplaceable and unrepeatable. Yet this wonderful diversity is knit together into an equally wonderful unity. But within this unified diversity the church belongs to and cares for one another. Paul now deals with the attitude that says "I don't need anyone else; I can do it on my own."

Now we see this attitude within our world and it is wrong in that context but it is a disaster when it is evident within the church. We all have the same Saviour we are the body of Christ therefore just as an eye has no right to say to the hand I don't need you or the head to the feet so Christians

have no right to speak of one another like that either (v 12). But this attitude was common in the church at Corinth.

A few prominent and gifted members acted as if they were self sufficient; as if they could carry the church on their own and live their Christian lives completely on their own. Such people overestimated their own importance and underestimated the importance of other believers. These self-sufficient believers were showing contempt for those in the church that they considered weak or less significant (vs. 21-22)

But Paul says that could not be further from the truth. To illustrate his point he comes back to the human body. Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are actually indispensable (v 22). I think Paul is probably thinking about the unseen parts of our body things that we perhaps don't pay much attention to like our liver, or kidneys or lungs etc.

They are part of our body but we don't treat them in the same way as we treat the parts that we can see. These unseen organs are absolutely vital for human life. If we knew nothing about the functioning of the human body we might consider the unseen parts as weaker but we know that they are essential and vital. We can lose an eye or ear or arm and still live a full life, but when the heart fails or lungs are diseased then sadly life cannot go on.

That is Paul's point those people in the church that we might consider to be weaker and contributing little to the life of the church are vital. Their gifts may be unseen by many but they quietly get on serving their God through their gifts and they are indispensable to every church. In many ways such people with these gifts are more vital than those who display more noticeable gifts.

The unseen gifts are more vital than the upfront public gifts. Of course we need all types of gifts but Paul is counteracting the thinking that we only need certain gifts the prominent ones and other gifts the unseen ones are not necessary.

The vital ministries in the church are often the unseen ones. What about the gifts of helping others (v 28) is that not a gift that often will remain unseen yet many of us perhaps most of us will have experienced the effects of this gift. Can we really do without someone who has this gift? What about the gifts of administration (v 28) these are behind the scene gifts yet they are gifts that enable the church to function smoothly. Churches long for people with these particular gifts.

Churches often have no problem finding preachers to fill their pulpits every week but they simply long for people who are able to do efficiently the administration of the church or are able to simply help in a number of areas within the church. What about the gifts of serving or encouraging or contributing to the needs of others or showing mercy (Romans 12:6-8).

All these are often unseen but vital for the effects of such gifts are seen in the church and enjoyed by God's people. So the lesson is clear those that we consider to be weaker are indispensable, we need one another's gifts in order for this church to function as God intended it to function.

Therefore we ought to seek to encourage the use of each person's gift and do not think that your gift is superior or inferior to others for we need each part of the body to play its intended part so that the body can function well.

Paul continues to highlight this point by reminding us that there are some parts of our body that we treat with special modesty while other parts get no special treatment (v 23-24). The word "unpresentable" means shameful, indecent and here it is clear Paul is talking about those parts of our body that we consider being private and to be covered at all times. They must always be treated with great care and modesty.

Paul's point is that every Christian should be valued and treated with great care, especially those that we might think to be less important gift wise or even less gifted. We do not treat our own human body that way so we have no right to treat God's people and God's gifts that way.

Therefore we should show those who have the behind the scene gifts real appreciation and we should protect them from faulty thinking that assumes that their gifts are less important because they are often unseen.

The truth is they are vital; therefore let us encourage each person and each gift within our church so that we might not fall into the trap that some Christians at Corinth fell into. If we learn to do this then there will be no division in the church (v 25). The way to stop division is to show genuine concern for one another and that concern must be equal. We cannot show real concern for the upfront people in churches and show little or no concern for the behind the scenes people in churches. Every believer should get the impression from their fellow members that they are valued and that their gifts are important to the church.

There simply should be no favouritism within the church the person with the gifts of helps should be treated as a valued member of the church in the same way as the Pastor or Elders should be treated. When this sort of mutual love and concern is taking place in the church then when one part suffers all will suffer with it (v 26). When one part is honoured then the whole body will rejoice with that part.

When this sort of genuine and love and concern is displayed in the church then when one brother or sister is hurting, others will console them. When someone is blessed others will rejoice in that blessing. This sort of love and concern for others only happens to us when we understand that we are all part of the one body the church, when we all understand that each one of us is vital and an equal part of the body.

When none of us feel superior or inferior and when everyone is using their gifts in encouraging and helping one another. Sadly the sort of love and concern spoken of here is often missing within churches because of our own selfish individualism and our own selfish longing to be superior or our refusal to consider ourselves on equal terms with others and therefore we indulge in sinful inferiority.

When this genuine concern is displayed then there is no sense of competition within the church. There will be no envy or jealousy but there will be love and commitment to one another, which will be demonstrated in concern for one another. Remember "you are the body of Christ and each one of you is part of it" (v 27).

## **2. WE BELONG TO GOD AND THEY ARE HIS GIFTS (vs. 28-31)**

Paul reminds the church again that we belong to God and therefore the gifts are his perfect provision to equip His church. To show this Paul once again gives us a list of some of the gifts within the church and like his previous list in verses 7-10 Paul does not give us an exhaustive list. But he simply is illustrating his point that they are God's gifts and therefore there are many different gifts given for the benefit of the church. In this list Paul says that the people who have these gifts are appointed by God (v 28). The word means "to set" or "to place" and is often used to indicate the appointment to an Office. That is certainly true of apostles, prophets and teachers who were appointed to their Office and equipped accordingly by God.

The apostles and prophets were responsible for laying the foundation of the church and for receiving and declaring the revelation of God's word and they confirmed that word through signs and wonders. However it is important to notice that all these gifts here mentioned are appointed by

God, some of which are temporary gifts until the completion of the Scriptures and others are permanent and exist within the church today.

However every person and every gift has been appointed by God and therefore is seen by Him as necessary and vital for the proper functioning of the church. Not all these gifts are office bearers' gifts but the point is that God has appointed each person with their particular gift and role in the church.

He has placed us in this church so that we will use our gifts for the purpose for which they were given which as we saw last week is for the benefit of the church. So whether we have the gift of teaching or the gift of helping others or the gifts of administration or the gift of wisdom God gives to this church the gifts that we need and therefore to down play someone's gift or to think that we don't need certain gifts is to say that God has got it wrong. No person has all the gifts (v 29) and that is how it should be.

For God has many and varied gifts and He gives to each person the gift that His church needs and He does not give to one person all the necessary gifts. God has planned His church in such a way that we belong to one another and therefore we need one another.

So as we finish how do we respond to this chapter? Verse 31 points us in the right direction. In many ways this verse is the conclusion to the whole chapter. A chapter that has stressed God's sovereignty in distributing the gifts and our responsibility to be content with the gift God has given to us and to use it for the benefit of others and to receive other people's gift as from God and for the church.

But what are the "greater gifts" that we are to desire? The word "eagerly desire" usually has a negative connotation and means something like "coveting" or "jealously." Of course these words can be used in a positive and right sense and that is how it is understood in our translations. However I think it should probably be translated "but you eagerly desire the greater gifts." That seems to fit the context better for the Corinthians thought the showier more public gifts were the greater gifts and Paul would surely not ask them to desire those gifts?

If this is what Paul meant then he is telling the Corinthians to stop seeking those more public gifts because to do so is both presumptuous and meaningless. Every believer is perfectly gifted by God in the way that God intends us to be and our gifts best suit the ministry that God has appointed us for.

For some of us that ministry will be public for others it will be behind the scenes and we will have the right gifts for the purpose that we are performing. The Corinthians needed to learn this and they needed to seek a more excellent way, which in this context is the way of acceptance and contentment.

They needed to understand something of the wonderful unity and diversity within the church and they needed to understand something of the way of love that should be normal within the church. Paul will teach them about love in the next chapter but that will have to wait until next time.

Amen