

KEEPING THE BODY OF CHRIST BEAUTIFUL

1 Corinthians 12:12–31

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We return to our series in the first letter to Corinth. I've entitled today's message "Keeping the Body of Christ Beautiful." The church has been called by someone "The Third Humiliation of Jesus." Humiliation is a theological word. It means emptying out. It's a term that's used in Philippians to describe the self-emptying, the humiliation of Jesus. His first humiliation was when He left the splendor of heaven for the destitute poverty of the manger. His second humiliation was when He was crucified on the cross for our sins. And the third humiliation, it is said by someone, is the church which bears His name.

Another person humorously has put it this way. You may be aware of this saying. "The church is like Noah's ark. If it were not for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell within."

I happen to believe that the church ought not to be a humiliation to Christ; nor ought it smell like Noah's ark. The body of Christ is to be beautiful in the world, shining in its splendor, a credit to the Savior, who redeemed it. Today's Scripture really shares with us on how to keep the body of Christ beautiful.

I. I think the first step is given for us in verses 12–13, where Paul tells us we are to recognize that, first of all, we are the body of Christ.

The body is a unit. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:12–13, NIV). In times of great danger in our country, when the patriotism of the citizenry is called for and we stand in a public assembly and see the star

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spangled banner displayed; if we are American citizens, it brings to us a certain sense of pride of our country. Realizing that, when we come into Christ, we are part of His body—the idea of being part of the body of Christ—ought to fill us with an even greater sense of appreciation and patriotism toward the Lord. We are first of all His.

I cannot do anything apart from my body. At least not until I'm translated, and even then, I'll have a new body. I couldn't send my spirit here this morning. My body had to show up. I couldn't send my spirit to eat the doughnut this morning. My body had to participate in the experience. There is nothing much I can do except perhaps pray or think apart from my body. And even with that, I need my mind and lips. I need my body. When the Lord ministered on earth, when the Son of God became flesh, He chose to limit himself to His body. His body limited Him geographically. He could not simply fly away in spirit and minister in India. His body confined Him to minister to a very narrow stretch of the geography of the world. He was limited by weariness. He would be tired. He could not go twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Endlessly. He needed to sleep. He needed food. He needed water. He chose, in His earthly body, to be limited by the confines of that body.

He chooses now to be limited in the world to His body—His church. A poet has put it well: "He has no hands but our hands to do His work today. He has no feet but our feet to lead men on His way. He has no voice but our voice to tell men how He died. He has no help but our help to lead them to His side." It is an incredible thought to realize that Christ has limited His work in the world to His body, the church. We are a part of that body. We begin by making the body of Christ beautiful, through recognizing that Christ has ordained that we have a vital part in Him. Paul says, in these verses, that we enter the body through the baptizing work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who ushers us into the body. Even as the Spirit is the agent of Christ's conception—

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Mary conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, so the Spirit is at work conceiving Jesus in every life. We are born of the Spirit, baptized into the body through the Spirit, and we continue as living members of the body by drinking that same Spirit. The Spirit, on the one hand, is the agent of our baptism. He places us into the body. On the other hand, the Spirit is the one whom we drink.

While on vacation, in one of the services of the church I attended, a minister spoke who was not of the Pentecostal persuasion. I happened to arrive on the Sunday that he spoke against Pentecostal and charismatic people. So I sort of sat there and interacted a lot in my mind. One of the critical mistakes, though, that he made was assuming that the reception of the Spirit was something that sort of came in a package at conversion and that was it. Obviously, we receive the Spirit at conversion. No one who is truly a child of God can call Jesus “Lord” except by the Spirit. But the Spirit is the one from whom we drink. I believe we drink from the Spirit in accordance with our thirst. There is more of Him continually to seek after and to want in our life. The blessed Spirit places us into the body. The Spirit gives us to drink so that the body maintains its energy and life. Where would we be, in our natural body, without something to drink? The unity of the body of Christ develops from its source—one original cell.

I was reading an article this week talking about cell duplication. We all began from one cell. The cell has two kinds duplication. One is simply cell reproduction. My skin cells reproduce skin cells. Then there’s what is called “cell differentiation,” which is where an original cell has within it the capability to do many different things. The original cell contained all my tactile ability, my ability to feel, my ability to see, to hear and the like. All of those cellular developments are off of one original cell. You don’t make a body by getting an arm somewhere and then finding a leg and putting it on with Elmer’s glue. You don’t make a body that way. The body develops off of

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one original cell. So the body of Christ is not made through some artificial organization, where you paste people together. But it is made through the extension of the life of Jesus Christ, who multiplies in us. And all the potential that is in all of us combined is in Him. We are simply the multi-faceted expression of His one nature. We are His body, if we have come to Christ.

II. The second thing that the Scripture is telling us about keeping the body of Christ beautiful is, I think, we must have a healthy appreciation for our part in the body.

Paul here warns against two dangers:

A. The danger of concentrating on our inferiority, so we don't feel like we have anything to contribute.

B. And the other danger, on the opposite extreme, of feeling like we're so good and we're so superior and we have so much ability, that we don't need anybody else.

First, the feeling like we have an insignificant part. "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be 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 cease to be 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 arranged 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 Corinthians 12:12–20, NIV).

Of course, the foot is a lesser part of the body than the hand. The ear is a lesser part of the body than the eye. Paul is saying that there is practically an attitude that sometimes exists among some parts of the body that says, "My part is not important as somebody else's. Therefore I'll do nothing. What have I got to offer? I don't have anything to offer. I don't sing, I don't preach, I

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don't pass out tracts, I don't teach a Sunday School class. What do I have to offer? Therefore, I'm insignificant. I'll detach myself from the body." Paul says, "No, take the illustration of the foot. What if the foot went on strike and said, 'Since I'm not the hand, then I'm not part of the body'?"

Can you imagine me getting up this morning and my foot informing me, as I pulled it out of bed onto the floor, "I'm going on strike today. I don't like being covered up with a black sock. Why do preachers always wear black socks? I don't like being covered up with that black shoe. Not the loafer, but the ones with strings. I don't like being in a closed place when the hand gets to be out in the open. The hand gets to do all the writing. I don't get to do any. Your hand, George Wood, goofed up at playing the piano and being an artist and as a foot, I'd like to try. And besides all that, I never get a chance to feed your mouth or pound the pulpit. And I refuse to work any longer as a foot." We'd be in trouble right away if the foot went on strike.

Paul goes on to say that when we look at other parts of the body and say, "I wish I were like them." If we were all like them, then it would be a one part body and a one part body would be grotesque.

A youth pastor taught his high school youth this illustration one day, about the body being one part. He, in private, painted a football white, then he painted an iris and a pupil. He took the eye and wrapped it in a blanket and took it in the high school class, all covered up. There came a moment when he was teaching about the body that he pulled out the eye and said, "I want you to see my baby, how cute it is." He spreads the blanket back and there's this eye, looking at everybody. The kids said, "Terrible! Gross! Calling an eye a baby!" He said, "Imagine you were out with your girlfriend and she was nothing but a big eye. You took her out for a milk shake and

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propped her up in a booth. All she did was stare at you with this one big, unblinking eye.” How gross!

The eye is beautiful, but remove it from the head, remove it from the rest of the body, and it is nothing. The eye only gets its beauty because it’s in the body. All of us in the body have a part.

Let’s not, any of us, feel that we’re so insignificant. God has put you in the body for a purpose.

What is that purpose? Do you know what that purpose is? Have you sought to discover that purpose?

That purpose may not have anything to do with the ongoing of the institutional church, the program of the church, although it may well be, because there are many ministries needed within the program of the church. The ministry of Jesus in His body in the world was to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that were oppressed and proclaim that this is the year that God has favor for mankind. For Christ, part of being in the world is doing those very things; part of being a hand or a foot or whatever part of the body gives itself to those tasks of Christ.

Paul, on the one hand, takes the Corinthians and who say, “We’re insignificant” and he says, “No, you’re not!” then he takes the other side of the Corinthian body and who says, “We’re independent. We’re more spiritual than the rest of the people. We don’t have the need of the others.” So he talks about that in verses 21–26. “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 combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in

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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 Corinthians 12:21–26, NIV).

Paul here is saying to those in the congregation who may have a false sense of their own importance, who want to detach themselves and live independently, “No, you cannot do that.”

There are really two heresies of the Christian life. One heresy may be one in which we maintain ourselves in the nursery by always being totally dependent and drawing from other people and never giving of ourselves. Another heresy is the heresy of being independent, where we say, “We don’t need anybody else.” The right balance is interdependence. That’s what Paul is calling for here. He’s saying, for those who think they have a more important role in the body of Christ, and maybe even do, “You need the less beautiful part, you need the less functional part, you even need the less honorable part.” You give the less honorable parts special honor.

Some of you who have knobby knees tend to wear clothing that hides the knobby knees. You are giving honor to your less presentable parts. That’s what Paul’s talking about. Preachers with growing waistlines tend to wear three-piece suits. They are showing honor. Graying hair gets Grecian Formula. If there is a member of the body we feel maybe is a little bit less than the rest, what do we do? We treat it with special honor.

That’s what Paul is saying. When you look at someone else in the body and say, “They’re not as good a part of the body as I am, and therefore I won’t have anything to do with them.” He says that the opposite attitude must be taken. “You must clothe that person with special honor, special praise, special recognition, special care.” That’s the attitude. Not one to withdraw in isolation.

He says that the body exists as a mutually interdependent organism of life. One party depends

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upon another. When there's hurt in one part, it's not just that part that hurts. It's all of us that hurt. When one part rejoices, all of us rejoice.

He says, in verse 25, that there is to be no division in the body. The word he used in the Greek is the word *schism* or "sectarian rent." A tearing, a splitting up. There is to be no *schism*. Instead, members are to look out for one another.

We know this, of course. On a physical level, we see this demonstrated all the time. How members of our body look out for each other. I thought of how this applies to my favorite Mexican restaurant. One part of my body looks out for another part. They have tortilla chips they bring out, like most Mexican restaurants, and hot sauce you can dip them in. My taste buds love that. That's the part of my body that likes that delicacy. But I have found that, if I give my taste buds free reign, what happens is that that night I can't sleep. My salivary glands protest, because they dry up whenever the taste buds are satisfied. I wake up at three in the morning thirsty, and I'm unable to get back to sleep. So I've developed a pleasure-pain principle, which says that if the pain that will ensue from the pleasure is going to be as great as the pleasure or greater than the pleasure, I will skip the pleasure in order to prevent the pain. That doesn't sound that hard. That's a demonstration of what Paul is talking about. One part of the body is looking out for the other. That's what he's saying that we're to be in the body of Christ. One part looking out for the other. He's saying that the church, the body of Christ, is meant to be a shared fellowship. That is hard to do. It is hard for a group in our culture to be a shared fellowship where people are really connected to one another. Most churches in our society are like a mannequin. You can put the arm on or take the arm off. Nobody notices. Put another arm on. It has many disposable parts that you can assemble.

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When we were gone, we had an opportunity to visit three churches on three different Sundays. It's quite a bit of difference to have the perspective of a visitor. It's amazing how comfortable you get always walking out this door—you know the people, you love the people. It's home. You forget what it's like to come into a church through the eyes of a visitor. We went to churches that are known for their vitality. In two out of the three churches, no one greeted us on the way in, except the ushers handing us the bulletin. No one on the way out greeted us. In two out of the three. In the third church, a young couple made us warmly feel at home. It made all the difference in the world. The messages were ok, but it was the people that made the difference. I know that you cannot become part of a body in sixty minutes on Sunday morning. There's no way you can walk in as a visitor and all of a sudden be in deep relationship with everyone. Relationships never quite happen that fast, except if the Holy Spirit brings about some kind of unique miracle. I realize that—I'm not judging each of those churches. I wouldn't want anyone to judge us. But I realize that in each one of those, I could have been a vital part of that body, but it would have required some input on my part. I couldn't have done it by just showing up on Sunday morning. I'd have needed to find a Sunday School class or small group or neighborhood fellowship or other Christians in that body to begin fellowshiping with. That would have been the only way for the real body life to begin to take place. Only then can you begin to have shared fellowship. A shared concern.

Paul is telling us here, "Have a body where there is a mutual, interdependent relationship toward one another." Don't just be together. There's a difference between union and unity. There's a difference between being together and having real unity. In the body of Christ, we're meant to have unity, not just to simply be together, sitting by one another.

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III. The third way to keep the body beautiful is that we must desire the gifts which best build up the whole body.

That’s what Paul says in verses 27–31. “Now,” he says, “you are the body of Christ”—that’s speaking of all of us together—“and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:27–31, NIV).

Paul here begins a very delicate and tactful correction of Corinthian priorities. It’s obvious, reading 1 Corinthians 12–14, that the experience most desired by the Corinthians in a worship service was public speaking in tongues, sometimes with interpretation, sometimes not. It somehow hadn’t been a service unless this had happened a lot. So Paul must begin a very tactful correction of that.

I can remember experiences from my own background where there was an eager desire for the Spirit to move. Sometimes, the Spirit would move in the service in such a way that a minister would not preach that morning, for God was doing a work of conviction or inner healing in someone’s life. But sometimes it would become sort of the thing to walk away from the service and say, “The Spirit didn’t fall today, so the preacher preached.” As though, somehow, preaching or teaching were on a rank about six steps down from the Spirit moving so that there was no preaching.

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This is the kind of atmosphere I think was going on at Corinth. Sometimes, I think you have to grow up in a Pentecostal-charismatic atmosphere to understand what Paul is saying in Corinthians. I don't know how you would get that from another kind of a background. But that's basically what he's saying here to them. He's tactfully reminding them: that's not the case at all. On an individual basis, Paul has said that we must give honor to the seemingly weaker parts of the body, but what he's saying is that, when we gather together corporately, we must seek preeminence on those gifts which best build up the body. When he says, "Desire the greater gifts," he's not talking about it so much individually, but he's talking about it in plurality, as the whole congregation. The whole congregation should desire the greater gifts. What are these? He names them, one, two, three.

First, apostles. We're to desire apostles. These are people who plant churches and bring the body of Christ into a region or area where it has not been. That's how the church gets started—through apostolic activity, a church planting activity.

Second, prophets. These are persons who encourage, who inspire, who correct, who exhort, who console the body of Christ with the speaking ministry and help them in living the Christian life.

Then there are teachers, he says. These are persons who take the Word of God and help people to inform their lives with it, they take the Word of God and make it practical in everyday living. We can understand, in the Early Church, how important the office of teaching was. In those days, an individual Gospel, written on the material it was then written on—papyrus—took a person one year's wages to buy. If you were an average workingman, it would take you eight years to buy the entire New Testament to read for yourself. So people, on an individual basis, could not have the Scriptures to read. It took teachers who had the possession of the Scriptures and the

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understanding of the Scriptures to bring it forth. Teaching, of course, is an important office in the church today, as well.

Then beyond the one, two, three, Paul says there are other foundational gifts, such as miracles and healing and helps: the ability to help other people with a special gift, seeing when somebody's in need and giving them help. The gift of administration: which was a word that was used to describe the pilot of a ship, who steered the ship across the harbor and avoided the rocks and shoals, and brought it safely into the harbor. Administration: Here seen as those who had oversight in the church and could keep it off the rocks, moving toward its goal. Administration. And tongues. He said, "As these occur in a public setting, they are dispersed in the body. No one person has them all."

It's even more important, though, to desire the better gifts, the foundational gifts of apostleship and prophecy and teaching, without despising the lesser gifts, which are just as important in edifying the body in their proper usage, but more important than desiring the greater. Paul would go on to say, "There's still a better way and that's the way of love," that we'll be looking at next week.

Lower life forms have no distinct, separate organs, or very few. You hold an earthworm and you really don't see a lot of parts. Just kind of a living line of squiggle—no separate neck, no ears, no eyes, you can perceive, at least from a distance, no tail, no legs, no hair. It's a simple organism. But the more complex the life form becomes, the more complex and numerous are its parts. At the same time, its unity increases so much that when you come to us as human beings, who in all the created order are the most complex, we have the most different parts. Yet there's a unity which must pervade those parts if they're to blend into one another.

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So the body of Jesus Christ in the world is a highly complex life form. It requires the input and the involvement of all of us, coming from our various backgrounds with our different gifts, our different natural abilities. God has arranged them in the body. I have sufficient faith in what the apostle is saying here to believe that God has not only arranged this in a general sense in the body, but God has put us together as a local church and arranged us together so we work beautifully, and we're meant to complement and strengthen and encourage one another and get the work of Jesus done in the world. But the church of Jesus Christ is a highly complex life form, sustained by the unity and by the work of the Spirit in us.

The more we truly become like Christ, the more truly we'll be like ourselves and not like someone else, and the more truly we'll be in love with the other members of the body that Christ has put us with.

Closing Prayer

Our loving Father, we would like to believe that You could look at us as the body of Your Son, and say to Your body what You said to Your Son, "Thou art my beloved Son, with Thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). If it is indeed, our chief purpose in life to give You praise and glory, then nothing could make You more joyful than for us to indeed be clothed by the beauty of Christ. To be the kind of fellowship of people to which a person comes, who does not know You, and senses Your presence and says, "There's something different here. There's life here. There's truth here. There's love here." Somehow, Lord Jesus, we as Your body can be in the world, beautiful for You. We say this, not of our own work or effort, but with a practical, conscious recognition that all that we have is a gift from You. In a forensic way, in a theological way, we're already clothed with Your righteousness. Already seen as well beloved by You. In a

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practical and experiential way, we pray, Lord Jesus, that in fact we would truly be what You already see us to be in faith. Through our Lord, we pray. Amen.