

1 Corinthians 12

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[0:00] 1 Corinthians 12, page 959 in the Black Church Bibles, if you need to go back there.! And we're picking things up as we go through. And the issue before us this morning really in the church! is an issue to do with a one level rivalry, rivalry in the life of the church. Cultivating rivalry, a spirit of competitiveness with other people, that can actually be a really fruitful thing in life.

It drives success in business. It's absolutely vital in sport. There is really no sport without rivalry. And it is that spirit that enables lots of people to accomplish really remarkable feats in life. I want to say, especially in men, thinking about beating someone is itself a great motivator for all kinds of productivity and innovation and success. Rivalry can be a really positive thing.

But in the wrong context, like say, a marriage, or between parents and children, or in a friendship, rivalry can be toxic. When everything is turned into a contest in those relationships, it becomes exhausting and really pretty destructive. I'm not saying don't have games, don't in family life create contests, that kind of thing. I certainly hope that if you've got little boys, that you don't just let them win in contests against you. You've got to wait until they can actually beat you, because then they know they've succeeded, and they know it's their turn to pay the bills and be in charge and that kind of thing. So, what I'm talking about is that spirit that says, everything's got to be a contest. I've always got to win. I've always got to be better than everybody else, and I've always got to be superior. We all know people like that, and they're a pain in the neck to be around. But where this spirit of rivalry is most out of place, the Apostle Paul tells us this morning, is in the church. The community of God's people, and the Corinthians are bedeviled by it.

We've seen it from the start of the letter. If you've been here on this big long journey, we've been on through the letter of 1 Corinthians. Remember right back in chapter 1 verse 10? Of course you remember chapter 1 verse 10. Paul appeals to the church to fix up their divisions. There are divisions among them. They're fighting. They've turned their relationships into contests and rivalry. We have real wisdom from God. You don't. We believe the right message. You don't. We follow the right leader. I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. I follow Cephas. I follow Christ. All that kind of stuff.

[2:42] You don't. You don't have the right guy. We know what freedom in the Lord really means. You don't. You're enslaved. And this attitude comes to the fore again here in chapter 12 in the area of spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 verse 1, now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. The word gifts here isn't in the original. It's been supplied. The original simply says, now concerning the spiritual or concerning spiritual ones. Paul doesn't want them to be uninformed about what it actually means to be a spiritual person. And what they have done is clearly got confused on that point. They are... What they're doing, it seems, is that they're making the presence or lack of certain spiritual gifts a sign that one was better than the other, a sign that some were superior to others, and they could look down on those that didn't have the gifts that they had. And it seems that in this section, chapter 12 to 14, this particularly concerns the idea of speaking in tongues, the gift of being able to speak the gospel in another language. And I'm sorry to say that this remains today. Some

Christians think, basically, that there are some that have a particularly special set of gifts, and there are those that don't, and those that don't are deficient in some way. In some circles, it's fair to say that we have what C.S. Lewis calls an inner ring, who are separate from the rest of us. There's the special group that have this particular spiritual gift, speaking in tongues, that kind of thing, and then those that don't have it. Well, sad to say, you're not really as good. You're not really as spiritual. And that approach to the Christian life is precisely what Paul writes to challenge here in the Church of Corinth. And he starts by making it clear. Point number one, every Christian has the Spirit. That's our first point. Four points this morning. Point number one, every Christian has the Spirit, verses 2 and 3. There is a dividing line, he says. But the dividing line, isn't inside the church. It's between the

church and the world. Verse 2, you know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says Jesus is accursed. And no one can say Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit. There is the dividing line. Do you see it? There are pagans who blaspheme the Lord Jesus, and there are those who call Him Lord, and it's one or the other. That's the dividing line between those who are spiritual and those who are unspiritual, according to the apostle. And Paul says that anyone who declares that Jesus is Lord, and obviously by that he means declares that Jesus is Lord and actually means it, they've been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Because no one can do that apart from the Spirit's work in their heart. None of us by nature look at Jesus, hear His teaching, and say, I love you, and I want to submit my life to you. Whatever you say, I'm going to do.

Wherever you lead, I'm going to follow. None of us can say that by nature, because we're rebels against Christ in His world. None of us hear Christ by nature. None of us hear Christ say to us, you need to turn from your sins and put your faith in me if you want to have life that is truly life, if you want to have eternal life in relationship with God. None of us hear that and by nature say, yes, that's what I want to do. So let me ask you, we had the creed a moment ago.

Did you mean what you said when you confessed in the Apostles' Creed? I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. Did you mean it? If you meant it, and it wasn't just vain repetition, it is of course possible just to say it and go along with everyone else, but if you meant it, it's only because a miracle has happened in your heart. It is only because God has taken your heart of stone and He has given you His Holy Spirit and His Holy Spirit has transformed you. He has given you the faith that you need to respond, to be able to say His only Son, our Lord. Yes, He's my Lord and I'm with Him. That is the doctrine of regeneration. God, outside of us, by His grace and mercy alone, transforms us so that we see Jesus as more than a Galilean carpenter, more than a significant figure in history, more than anything else. And we say, yes, He is God in flesh and I am submitting my life to Him because that is what He requires and that is what is good for me. That is the only way that I can be reconciled to the living God. You don't need particular gifts or experiences to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He fills every believer. He gifts and He animates the life of anyone who puts their faith in

[7 : 43] Him. First point that Paul makes this morning, every Christian has the Spirit. Second point is this, every gift has the same source. Verses 4 to 11, verse 4, now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit. There are varieties of service but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. The way that Paul describes this is interesting. Do you see this? There are many gifts and they are given by the same Spirit, verse 4. Their service is governed by the same Lord, verse 5. And the same God is at work in their use, verse 6. The source of every gift that we have is God the Holy Trinity. And each of the persons are at work in the various gifts that the Spirit gives.

Paul makes the point again in verses 8 to 11 as he lists some of the gifts. These all come from the same source, the Spirit of God working inseparably with the Father and the Son.

The Corinthians were fixating on certain gifts, holding some to be more necessary or better or superior than others, and this was what caused the division. But if all of our gifts come from God, all of them, and they are given according to His sovereign will, verse 11, their differences are not something that we should worry about. The fact that He got these gifts and abilities and she got those gifts and abilities and I got these gifts and abilities is just simply an expression of the generosity and the creativity of our God. One theologian says this, We must not disparage the manifestation of this gift here and a completely different gift over there, any more than we would slight the fact that the same God created the sea lion and the little yellow canary. That is how our God is. Don't wish that you had someone else's life. Don't look around and feel better or worse because God in His infinite wisdom gave that person over there, whoever they are, different gifts than you. The point from a couple of weeks ago that I made in connection with how God has designed and given different roles to men and women is just as relevant here. Difference is not a value statement. One gift is not better or worse because our God has given them, and He's good, and He is wise, and He has decided how He wants to do that. He's good, He's wise, He's also free. He can do what He likes.

Every gift has the same source. Point number three, every gift has the same purpose. Every gift has the same purpose. Look at verse 7. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the

common good. To each, again, that's our first point, everyone has been given gifts, not just some, but we're given those gifts for the common good in the life of the church. The gifts that we are given are for the good of everyone. So that means that we are given gifts. The gifts are given to us for others.

To us for others. They aren't given so that we can rank ourselves beside others. They're up here. I'm in here. That's good because they're down there kind of thing.

[11:27] It's not that we go and order things. We love doing that in life. Our culture loves to do that. Where do I fit? Where, you know, at least, maybe I'm not as good as them, but at least I'm better than them.

That kind of thing. Our gifts are not for us. They're not about us. They are certainly not to make us look good. We are given them for the sake of others. Someone, think about this. If someone was given an exquisite musical gift, just a wonderful musical gift, what would we think if they only ever went into a private room and locked the door and played there on their own? Whatever the music, whatever the musical instrument was, whatever it was that they did. But they only did it for their own ends. We think that was a great shame. There's a song that I have on a playlist somewhere. I can't remember who sings it. I don't know what the title of the song is. So in some ways, that's, you don't need to, that's beside the point to be fair. But song is about somebody singing about how they were ready to give up singing. But in the course of the song, I mean, it's been, it was quite a revelation. I don't know, two and a half minutes, something like that. In the course of two and a half minutes, they realized that actually, if they did that, they would be selling other people short. Their voices was a gift, and they'd been given it for the good of others. And the chorus says this, it ain't yours to throw away. That was the realization they came to. Because gifts are given for the common good, for the sake of others, for the blessing and the upbuilding of others.

And particularly in the life of the church, it's for the blessing and the upbuilding of their faith. They're not ours to give away. We give them to others. We use them for others. But we can't either keep them for ourselves or not use them.

And just to say, if the common good is the goal of how we think we use, think about how we use our gifts, this should also think, frame how we think about gifts that we might not get to use in the life of the church. Just because you have certain gifts, or perhaps think you have certain gifts, if those don't serve the common good, we shouldn't demand that we can use them. Common good is the goal. If we insist that we have this thing that we want to use our way, well, we're putting ourselves at the center again, just in the way that this rivalry works as well, making it all about us.

I think it's important at this point to ask what it is that Paul is talking about here when he means a gift of the Spirit. So look at the list. Verse 11, look at what he lists out. Verse 8, for to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to that same Spirit. To another, faith by the same Spirit. To another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit. To another, the working of miracles. To another, prophecy. To another, the ability to distinguish between spirits. To another, various kinds of tongues. To another, the interpretation of tongues. There are three other lists of gifts in the New Testament, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter chapter 4. And they differ from each other a bit. So, there are ten gifts that are mentioned here, and there are ten others in those other places. But there's no reason for us to think that God has only given twenty gifts to His church. These lists aren't exhaustive, the lists that were given in the New Testament. And the reason that Paul includes the gifts that he includes here is because they were the ones that the Corinthians were dividing over. These were the ones that they were making a reason for thinking better than others looking down on others. And as we come to this passage, we have to remember that we're not in the first century anymore. There was a kind of gifting that was given to particular people prior to us having the Bible as God's authority of revelation.

[15:27] The kind of gifting required to attest to the truth of the gospel as it broke into new lands in those missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. The kind of gifting needed to be an apostle. The kind of gifting that preceded the Bible being able to be written. And from our perspective, we don't need that now because we have the Bible. Paul says in chapter 13 of this letter—we'll get there in a couple of weeks—he says in chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians, the next one in the New Testament, prophecy in this sense, and apostolic signs were for that time. Now, that doesn't mean that the Spirit has stopped working, obviously, or that God doesn't answer our prayers, obviously, or that He doesn't do miraculous things anymore or move in remarkable and mysterious ways. Of course He does. We live in a magical story. Our world is a magical story that the author is bringing to its

conclusion, far above what we could grasp or understand. Our whole world is a theater of miracle in that sense. One author has said this,

I believe the gift of miracle working has ceased, not that miracles have ceased. I believe that the gift of healing has ceased, not that healing has ceased, and so on. Most simply, we believe that the gifts that belong to the pre-Bible apostolic era have ceased. We live in a different time. We have our Bibles.

And what that means is, well, one thing that I think, therefore, is important to see is that the scope of God's gifting goes beyond what we might describe as the supernatural. Think about it. God's gift to us includes everything that we have. Remember back in chapter 8 verse 6, all things come from God. Everything you have from the breath that you breathe that you don't know you're breathing while you're asleep to everything else comes from God. Chapter 4 verse 7, 1 Corinthians 4 verse 7, what do you have that you did not receive? It's the same point.

Everything that we have is a gift that is given to us from the hand of God. Your physical or intellectual or social abilities are gifts from God. Those compassionate instincts that encourage others who are struggling.

That joyful disposition that lifts the people around you. Your courage that stands up for truth and leans in to protect the vulnerable. Your willingness to see a need and because you're able to meet it, to go and meet it. All of these gifts are given by God's Spirit. And He didn't give them to you for you to lock them away, but so you could deploy them for the common good. Paul crystallizes this point using a metaphor of the body. Verse 12, look at verse 12, For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member, but many. What he's saying, we're united in Christ. Our gifts come from the same source. They're for the same purpose, and we belong to the same body. Therefore, point number four, every Christian has a role in church life. Every Christian has a role in church life. Every Christian has the Spirit. Every gift has the same source. Every gift has the same purpose. Every Christian has a role in church life. It's one body with many members. That is what Christ's body is like.

[19:25] And the way Paul deploys this metaphor highlights two important truths about what it means to be the church, what it means for us. Here's the first thing, we all belong. That's verses 12 to 16. If the foot should say, because I am not a hand, I don't belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the foot wished that it was another part of the body, and because it wasn't, it didn't feel like it belonged, it can't change reality. It belongs as part of the one body. And so it is with Christ's church. Just because you might think someone else's gifts are better, or you would like them more than the ones you've been given, you still belong to the body of Christ. And your gifts were given by the same sovereign Spirit. So do you have the Spirit? That is, are you trusting Christ as your Lord? The answer to that is yes. Then you can't avoid the fact that you belong, and you have an important role to play for the good of Christ's body. And can I say, if you're someone that comes regularly, you consider IPC Ealing to be your church, but you're not yet a member, I want to encourage you, come along to Membership Matters, first two Sundays in September, and get involved. Become a member of the church that you're a part of, and get involved in serving, because we all belong. The second implication, in verses 17 to 20, what Paul then goes on to say is that we need each other. We need each other. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? Elbows can't see. Whatever you do to your elbow, you can't see out of it.

Your eyes can't filter your blood. A body that functions well requires different parts to do different things. It's obvious. The one body has many members, verse 12. Many parts, verse 20, for precisely this reason. I don't know if you can still get those gobstoppers that look like eyes. You know what I'm talking about? The big gobstopper has an eye on them. I remember a while back seeing a half-sucked one of those sitting on the pavement outside my house. And I looked at it, and for a moment I imagined, what would it be like if that was a real eye? And I thought about how useless it would have been sitting there on the ground, disconnected from the body. I mean, let's say it was still able to see. It could only see in one direction.

That was very limited and in many ways utterly useless. If the whole body of Christ only had one gift, it simply couldn't function. The Spirit gives different gifts to different people in the diverse body of Christ in order to accomplish His work. I was thinking this week at the prayer meeting we were

praying for the Holiday Bible Club coming up, and so much of what happens in the Holiday Bible Club? Teaching, games, snacks, crafts, making sure that people are moved around the building safely, music, all that kind of thing. Think of the variety of gifts that are needed, but think as well about how they need each other. Holiday Bible Club doesn't work if you just have the teacher, or you just have the games, or everybody comes and they just have a snack and go home. The whole thing only works if everybody brings their gifts. I was thinking the same a moment ago when we were praying for the giving thanks for IPC by the sea. All of those leaders, some of them needed to be gifted in teaching. All of them needed an astonishing amount of the gift of patience, and all the other things that went along with that in the kitchen, on the beach, everything else. It was a wonderful time because everybody brought their gifts. And without those gifts, it would not have worked, and it would have been a much more diminished experience. Both of those are a mini picture of church life.

We need each other. And so, because of that, I want to close by speaking to two kinds of people who are in view here the apostle has in view. To those who feel unworthy because of a lack of certain gifts.

[23 : 44] If that's you, the apostle Paul says you're vital. God has given you gifts as He chose. He knew what He was doing when He gifted you. Do not think or let anyone tell you that your gifts aren't valuable.

They are crucial to the body of Christ. And if you're someone who thinks, because I can't do X, or because I'm not able in that area, there's no place for me at this church, that's not the case. Your gifts are vital to the life of this place. Encouragement, service, administration, generosity. Lots of us, lots of you are gifted in those ways, and those are vital gifts to bring to church life. You don't need after this morning to go away and work out what your spiritual gift is. Lean into what's ever in front of you, and if you can meet that need, meet that need with your gifts. And can I just say as well, if you think that you have perhaps more humble gifts, maybe, I don't know the way you think about it all, but the gifts that you have, you use those in largely unseen ways, and you think, oh, no one would notice if I didn't use my gifts here. Not the case. The church runs on your service. Without you, we'd be stuck. So keep doing what you're doing for the common good. You're a blessing to everybody here. Paul doesn't just speak to those who feel unworthy. He speaks all to those who feel very worthy. Verse 21, look at them.

The eye cannot say to the hand, I've no need of you, nor again the head to the feet. I've no need of you. The proud Corinthians need to know that there's no poor me on the one hand, I don't belong here, but neither is there, oh, poor you. If only you were at my level.

[25 : 30] All the gifts God gives are indispensable to the healthy working of the body of Christ. Have you ever heard of Roy Halley? Has anyone? Put your hand up if you've heard of Roy Halley.

Okay. You're more likely to have heard of Art Garfunkel, one half of Simon and Garfunkel. But there were two important relationships in Paul Simon's music career. One was Art Garfunkel. The other was this man, Roy Halley, who has been Paul Simon's sound engineer for about 60 years. All the music that Paul Simon created was engineered by this guy.

So without Roy Halley, there'd be no Paul Simon. And without Paul Simon, Roy Halley would be an unknown music engineer, as unknown as he is here this morning. The point is they needed each other's gifts in order to accomplish the beautiful music that was created. Both of them were necessary, neither was sufficient on their own. What if Roy Halley thought that he was worthless because he couldn't write or sing like Paul Simon?

What if Paul Simon thought, I don't need you because I'm the talent here? I'll tell you what, we wouldn't have the boxer or bridge over troubled water or boy in the bubble or any of those brilliant tunes. It is that way in the church. All are needed. No one is sufficient on their own.

Some of us are the hands, others are the feet, some are the liver, but we depend on each other. We are a body. And Paul then pushes this further, 22 to 25 as he closes it out. It's an interdependence that has a particular bias towards those who are weaker and appear to be less honorable than others.

[27 : 18] Paul says that in the body of Christ, those people that the culture overlooks, that Corinth would have sniffed at and looked down on, are indispensable and should be honored most of all. Interdependence means that there are no little people in the life of the church. It means that if you are a member here, so you've acknowledged that Jesus is Lord and you're joined to this body and you feel weak and you think that you don't have anything to offer or not much to offer, maybe you

have an illness that prevents you from doing much. Maybe you feel like you take more than you give, then we as a church have a special privilege in serving you, in honoring you and making sure that you're cared for.

Like I say, our culture says, like Corinth, that your value comes from your abilities and your status, and it is not that way in Christ's church. The weak and the modest are valued most highly. We deploy our gifts together for the common good with a particular emphasis on the weak. That is a beautiful picture of how the community of the Spirit should work. You can't create such a thing along human lines. Rivalry, selfishness always gets in the way. I need to be recognized. I need to be served. I need to be treated as special. This kind of community can only come through the cross of Jesus.

That's why it is wonderful that we're going to the table this morning, a sermon about spiritual gifts, what it means to be spiritual, and yet we're coming to the table because it is all about the cross of Jesus. As you hear and respond to the message of the cross, that the Lord of glory gave up his life for us, that is why Paul mentions these foundational gifts at the end the way he does. Apostles, prophets, teachers, they teach the message of the cross, the message that is the pattern of a life of the independent service that we are called to live as a church together. It is the message of the cross that if we receive it by faith, opens the way to the Spirit, flooding our lives, not a cause for rivalry or superiority, but a cause for unity because he equips us with the gifts that we need to play our part in church life. Let's pray together.