

# What do you bring to the table?

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you want to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 12, we're going to read from there in a moment.

In a previous life when I first left school, which I realize isn't that long ago, I was a chef. So one of the things that I enjoy, not at this time of year because it's now finished, is the Great British Menu on TV.

I don't know if anybody else does. Perhaps you're thinking, I watch Bake Off or MasterChef, and that's similar, right? Then yeah, it is, in the same way that soapbox racing is similar to Formula One. I would say no offense to Bake Off or MasterChef, but I wouldn't mean it. Anyway, Great British Menu, for those of you who aren't familiar, is a competition involving the best up and coming chefs from all around Britain, preparing six courses with the hope of getting through to prepare at least one dish at a banquet at the end of the competition.

And not only are they expected to cook exceptional food, but they have the added task of cooking food to a theme, which this year was 100 years of British broadcasting.

[ 1 : 27 ] And they have to do so in a creative and ideally an interactive way. And in the competition stages, one thing that the judges often comment upon is when chefs' dishes are lacking one particular element or elements which would make them more complete.

See, a perfect dish of food has to be more than just a group of separate ingredients thrown together on a plate with different flavors, textures.

It needs to be a perfect marriage of all the ingredients brought together to form one single, coherent plate of food. Which works together in such a way that all the ingredients are necessary and all contribute something.

And to remove any of the ingredients or change their proportion would be to undo the wholeness and completeness of that dish. Each part of the dish brings something to the table, so to speak. And thinking of that, we're going to read now starting at verse 12 from 1 Corinthians 12.

[ 2 : 42 ] 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 of many. If the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, thou would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear should say, Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would it be the sense of hearing?

If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

[ 3 : 52 ] On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And on those parts of the body that we think less honourable, we bestow the greater honour.

And our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.

There are three points from the passage I'd like to highlight this evening, which I hope will be an encouragement to you.

And I've put them under the headings of one body, many members, parts with no purpose, and completing Christ.

[ 5 : 03 ] One body with many members. And I'm just going to explain it for the sake of clarity. Although, yes, we use the term member, I'm going to use the phrase body part, simply to avoid the confusion of members of the church, members of the body.

So body part, that is what I'm talking about. In the first half of chapter 12, Paul has addressed the Corinthian church concerning spiritual gifts and the distribution of them among the believers. And the first verse of what we read tonight in verse 12 picks up on something that he's already said. In verse 4, he tells the Corinthians, 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. And now in verse 12, we read, 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.

That 4 that begins verse 12 refers back to verse 11, which itself references the whole of verses 4 to 10, which focuses on spiritual gifts.

[ 6 : 27 ] Back in chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians, Paul has addressed a problem which arises at the celebration of the Lord's suffering Corinth. A problem which was the result of disunity between members of the church, something Paul has picked up on right from the beginning of his letter.

The disunity described in chapter 11 appears to be the result of some sort of socioeconomic division where worldly things have been allowed to get in between brothers and sisters in Christ. half went hungry and half indulged their appetites. Here in chapter 12, Paul is less focused on the folly of disunity.

Rather, he is focused on the necessity of unity for the body of Christ. He asked it rhetorically in chapter 1, is Christ divided?

And here in chapter 12, he gives the answer to that question conclusively and removes any doubt. Christ is not divided. Also in chapter 12, when Paul makes his appeal to unity in the body metaphor, it is not on the basis of worldly conceptions of people that he sees the unity of Christ's body.

[ 7 : 47 ] Rather, it is on the basis of the spiritual gifts, which are the sovereign work of God in believers' lives.

I think it's quite easy to imagine that a good representation of the body of Christ, one body with many body parts, is a church made up of people from many cultural, racial, socioeconomic backgrounds, different professions, various ages.

Various degrees of physical and mental ability. But that's not what Paul envisages here. It's not about whether the people were Jewish or Greek, if they were slaves or free.

That's not what makes a believer a hand or a foot or an eyeball or an ear in his metaphor. The one body and many body parts image is best realized when believers, with various God-given spiritual gifts, use those gifts together in order to glorify God.

It's not of any use to God after all, if a church were the most culturally, ethnically and socially diverse group of people ever imagined, if they failed to use the gifts of the Spirit bestowed upon each individual believer in that church to glorify God.

[ 9 : 11 ] That's not to say it's not a problem if a church lacks social, cultural and ethnic diversity. It's just that it's a different issue of unity and diversity.

Now what this means is, it's really important that people's gifts are recognized. You know, some people will have a fairly good idea of the gifts that God has given them.

Some will be so unaware, they may be convinced that God left them out. And it's important in both cases that church leaders particularly, and other church members, are actively encouraging their brothers and sisters in Christ to use God's gifts for His glory.

And to help those who are uncertain of their gifts to discern them. It's also important that all God's people take time to encourage one another in the use of the Spirit's gifts.

And I want to encourage you all this evening because I know sometimes it can feel like we don't have anything to add, we don't have anything to give to the life of the church that someone else isn't already doing, or that someone else could do better.

[ 10 : 28 ] But God doesn't need this to be the best at anything to be useful. And that's just as well, or I couldn't stand here this evening. No, Moses, as we were thinking this morning, wasn't useful to God because he was a great speaker.

He literally protested against God sending him because he was slow of speech and of tongue. And yet God used him to not only speak to Pharaoh, but to lead Israel in the wilderness years, and to give the law at Mount Sinai.

In fact, one of the biggest mistakes that Moses made in his life was to try and refuse to serve God on the basis of his own lack of eloquence.

And the Bible isn't a catalogue of superhumans that God put on display for the whole world to see their greatness. It's an account of God using frail humans with all their weaknesses to serve his purposes on earth.

Abraham was a pagan. Rahab was a prostitute. David a murderer and an adulterer. Samson was a meathead. Gideon was weak.

[ 11 : 39 ] Mary a young girl in a patriarchal society. Martha fretted and was anxious. Peter was afraid of his own people. But think how God used these people.

He made Abraham the father of a great nation. He used Rahab to shelter the Israelite spies in Jericho and saved her alone from among all her people.

And in fact, she gets a mention in the bloodline of Jesus. David is remembered as the man after God's own heart who led Israel to many victories and did great things in God's name.

God used Samson to defeat many of the Philistine persecutors of Israel. He made Gideon into a great warrior who saved Israel and routed their enemies.

Through Mary was born the promised Messiah, a role that she accepted with joy. Martha opened her home to Jesus. And Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly defended his faith in the resurrection of the Christ before the rulers and the elders.

[ 12 : 45 ] of the Jewish people. And if you're still thinking, after all of that, that somehow you couldn't be of any use to Christ and his church, then let me remind you that God opened the mouth of a donkey in order to rebuke Balaam the prophet.

And I've definitely still to meet anybody who's of less use than a donkey. See, just as the human body requires all its parts to be functioning at their peak in order for it to function at its peak overall, the church is most effective when all the believers are serving according to their gifts.

And I know when you're facing a period of vacancy without a minister, from personal experience, it can be disorienting. It feels very unnatural.

And those are probably good and right reactions, natural reactions, because you're going without an important member of your congregation. If you were happy without a minister, then I think that would probably be a problem.

But at the same time, it's not a time for despair when faced with uncertainty. In fact, it can be an opportunity to help others recognize and explore gifts of teaching.

[ 14 : 05 ] And it's also a good way to be reminded that the same gifts in different people can look different. And that doesn't make one inferior to another. I think back to my perfect dish of food that I was describing, which is all about balance.

You know, one of the things in food that's needed for balance is acidity. Acidity can come from a variety of different places, of course. For example, if you were served a rich chocolate mousse for your dessert, then that may be balanced out equally well by a blackcurrant sorbet, a pickled apple, or a lemon gel, and many other things.

The three different ingredients all look and taste totally different, so they function the same way. They perform the same purpose for the dish.

And that brings me to my second point this evening. And I phrase this as a question. Because I think it's one that we need to ask ourselves continually.

And one we may already be asking ourselves. And it's the question of whether there are any parts with no purpose. Because one of the aims of restaurants these days is to be more sustainable and to be less wasteful, one of the features of many of the chefs cooking on Great British menu is that every part of every ingredient is used as far as possible.

[ 15 : 38 ] In fact, there was one chef who had an absolute zero waste policy, which meant that everything, including the brains of his lobster and the peelings from his vegetables, were used.

For him, there was nothing he used which could be of no purpose. And Paul's attitude about the body of Christ is effectively the same. He puts to the Corinthian believers two absurdities in order to illustrate this.

The first of which addresses those who maybe think, I don't belong. Listen to what Paul says again. If the foot should say, because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear should say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. The idea, of course, that a hand should think it doesn't belong to the body for any reason is absurd on the very face of it.

But the idea that it should think, I don't belong to the body because I am not a foot, is even more absurd. And the same goes for the ear. And yet, is it not so often our experience in church that we meet believers who think so little of themselves, that they cannot comprehend of their usefulness to God, particularly when they compare themselves to others?

[ 17 : 08 ] If we believe we are somehow capable of measuring and assigning our own worth, then I am afraid that that is not humility.

In fact, that is quite the opposite, because we are putting ourselves in the position of God. Because God determines our worth. God knows we are wretched, weak, poor sinners, that all of us like sheep have gone astray.

And God could easily have decided that humanity had absolutely no worth and been done with us as soon as Adam and Eve first sinned. But God didn't. Instead, He promised to Adam and Eve a descendant who would crush the serpent's head.

And according to Isaiah, one who would be crushed for our iniquities and bear the sins of many. Brothers and sisters, if you ever look at yourself and think that you have no worth, especially to the holy, almighty God, then look to the cross and see Jesus hanging there, bearing the wrath of God on account of our sins, and you will see how God reckons your worth.

He did not spare His only Son, but He willingly gave Him up for us. Christ bore that punishment willingly, so that we could become the adopted sons and daughters of God, His own brothers and sisters.

[ 18 : 43 ] And if while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, how could we then think that God will not, as Paul says in Romans, graciously give us all things?

David E. Garland, when commenting on this passage says, No matter what ears and feet might say if they could talk, they are integrally part of the body.

Note that the ear does not say that it wants to be an eye, and the foot does not say that it wants to become a hand. Both assume that they are unimportant in comparison, but both have their assigned position in the body.

See, the hand is a hand according to its place and purpose in the body. And that's simply true no matter how it views itself. Even if it were the case that the hand desired to be a foot, it has no power to change its own assigned position.

It's the indwelling Holy Spirit who apportions gifts to each believer according to the wisdom and sovereign purpose of God. And to say to ourselves, I do not belong, is therefore to recognize that God is the one who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

[ 20 : 04 ] Verse 18 of 1 Corinthians 12 said that God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. And that means that as long as you belong to the body of Christ, that is the church, then God has given you a place in that body.

And you may be assured that he will give you all that you need to fulfill the purpose that he requires of you. There is no part that does not belong.

The second absurdity, which Paul puts forth, addresses those in the church who look on their fellow believers and say, you're not needed.

Now, if the problem in Paul's first example was false humility or false perception of worth, then the problem in his second example is pure and simple arrogance.

He says, the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. So if the hand were to accept the eye's proposition, then how would the body touch or grasp any of the things it sets its eyes on?

[ 21 : 14 ] And if the feet listen to the head's proposition, how would the body propel itself toward anything it set its mind upon? These propositions are foolish as well as absurd, but pride so often is.

No, I sincerely hope that none of us are likely to encounter that sort of attitude in the active sense of hubris in anyone, where they would say that of a fellow believer or of that person's gift.

Hopefully we will never encounter anyone calling another person unnecessary or superfluous on account of their own supposedly superior or sufficient gift.

But I think we do encounter a more subtle or perhaps seemingly innocent form of this attitude, because we can look at someone perhaps perceiving their age, perhaps perceiving infirmity. We conclude that we can do without that individual for their own benefit. And that might seem like kindness, might seem like a mercy to do without the old or the infirm or the too young.

[ 22 : 31 ] But the body of Christ doesn't operate in that way. In fact, I hope I already made clear at the start this evening. A believer doesn't find their place in the body of Christ according to age or according to physical ability, rather according to the gifts of the Spirit, sovereignly apportioned by God to each and every believer without exception.

Moses was 80 years old when God sent him to Pharaoh. God's not held back by age. God crippled Jacob at Peniel, but he didn't discard him as no use afterwards.

And I would defy anyone to suggest that Joni Erikson Tada has nothing to offer the church because she's a paraplegic. God's not held back by age. But more than that, if we allow the church to operate without certain of its members, then we're preventing the church from being all that God intended it to be.

And we're preventing those believers from blessing one another. So when Paul speaks of some of the parts of Christ's body as weaker, less honourable or unrepresentable, then don't be tempted to think that the way that some do that suddenly Paul has in mind worldly concerns again.

Concerns of disability or age or socio-economic class. Please don't look at your brother or sister who uses a wheelchair and equate them with the weaker or less presentable parts of Christ's body.

[ 24 : 09 ] I wrote my dissertation this year on disability, specifically on deafness, but a lot of my reading was more generally on disability.

And honestly, I can't tell you how upsetting it is to read Reformed Evangelical speaking about disabled people as if the only thing they contribute to the church is to remind everyone of their brokenness and to be recipients of grace and charity from others.

If a deaf person or a paraplegic, someone with cerebral palsy or someone of a particular age can't serve the church, then nor can any of the rest of us.

Because by that sort of measure, we will all fall short of being useful somehow. We should be encouraged instead by Paul's words in verses 24 and 25, when he says, God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

So a truly united body has no dispensable parts, because it is instead complete in Christ. Now, if anyone were uncertain about the fundamental unity of the human body, then clearly you've never hit your funny bone, or you've never hit it hard enough.

[ 25 : 46 ] Because if you hit your elbow hard enough, then it jars your entire body. And in fact, you do it hard enough, and you will feel physically sick. That's why Paul writes of the body that if one member suffers, all suffer together.

And the opposite is also true. Now, if a sprinter wins gold at the Olympics, nobody wonders why the medal is placed around the athlete's neck, and not presented directly to their legs.

That would be ridiculous. Hence, Paul also writes, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

One of the great benefits of being saved in Christ is that we are not saved alone.

There's no believer who is an island. We're saved into the church, the body of Christ, which Paul says that we are all individually members of.

And it's incredible when I look around even just at the Christians that I know, and I see the diversity of backgrounds and personalities represented there.

[ 26 : 55 ] And I think a lot of the time, if we weren't all Christians, there's no way any of us ever would have met, let alone be family to one another.

Colossians 3, Paul writes that, Here there is not Jew or Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free. But Christ is all, and is in all.

And if that sounds like a lot of strange words, then it basically means that the things that once divided us, race, culture, creed, social status or anything else, they no longer hold any meaning for us at all.

To know God and to be known by Him, there's nothing higher than these. Other means of identification are not even secondary. They're nothing.

Christ is all. Vacancy can be a time of vulnerability. So, I would encourage you all, be on your guard.

[ 28 : 01 ] Because Satan often tempts us towards worldly concerns that so often stir up strife and division among God's people. But the fellowship that we enjoy with one another is of far greater importance than the petty things which so often divide us.

If the idea of body parts thinking other parts were useless is absurd, or thinking themselves unimportant is absurd, isn't it all so absurd to consider a body whose parts are at war with one another?

Let me encourage you then one final time this evening to help one another, to discern your gifts, and then use those gifts wisely in the service of the church and for the glory of God.

If you are not alone, then you may suffer as one, but you will also rejoice together as one. And it's a truly beautiful thing when the love that God's people have for one another is clear to the world in their unity and the peace that exists between them.

When each person recognizes that God has a purpose for them, and when their purposes are worked out together, then the body of Christ will truly resemble Christ, who came to do the Father's will and to glorify Him.

[ 29 : 24 ] Let me encourage you, lest any of you think that that is too lofty an aspiration or too burdensome a task, by reminding you once again that it is the indwelling Spirit of God who provides all that is necessary to do His will.

And finally, because I am aware that this message has really been to believers, if there is anyone here this evening who has not accepted Christ as Lord, then I hope that this picture of Christ's body, the church, those whom God has paid the ultimate price for, to have as His own people.

This group of people who bless one another and are blessed by one another as they serve God together, who grieve with one another in their difficulties and rejoice together in their times of joy. I hope that that sparked a desire to be part of such a body, and to know the God who requires of His people only faith, and who uses even the weakest of vessels to fulfill His purposes on earth. Amen.

As we come to our prayers of intercession this evening, we're going to be praying in particular for local government, considering that the council elections have just been.

[ 31 : 01 ] And afterwards we're going to sing Psalm 115, or some of the verses from it, which is a good reminder that glory is the God alone, and nothing else is worthy of our worship.

So, let's come before God in prayer together. Lord, we do want to thank you and to praise you because we are not saved alone, but we are saved as part of the fellowship, which is the church. Lord, we thank you that we can come before you united together. I give thanks to you, to worship you, to confess our sins before you.

Lord, we thank you that we can come before you and bring our supplications, our requests to you also. Lord, we know that, as Paul teaches, all authority derives itself from you.

There is no authority except that which you have set up. Lord, we pray for our counsellors who have just been elected in the recent elections.

[ 32 : 26 ] Lord, we pray that they would come to know you, those who do not. Those who do, Lord, for them particularly, we pray that they would remember that their first and only loyalty is to you.

They represent you wherever they go. Lord, we just pray that we would see a return in this country to a time when it was new.

Lord, we pray that you would help us.

Lord, we pray that you would help us. Lord, Lord, we pray that you would encourage our people.

And they definitely don't care what your people think. And Lord, it can be so hard to remember that we are called upon to honour those in authority because you've put them there.

[ 33 : 36 ] Lord, help us both to honour those you have placed over us, but Lord, also help us to be holding them to account.

And Lord, help us not to take no care for what goes on in this world just because we know we have a greater hope.

Lord, we are called upon to be a light in this world. So Lord, help us to be faithful, but also gracious and loving as we seek to influence those who have authority over us.

Lord, we pray for our Queen also at this time. Lord, as she struggles with her health, we just ask that you would sustain her.

Lord, we thank you for her many years of service. And we do pray that she would have many more ahead of her. Lord, we just pray that as new counsellors have come in this year, Lord, that they would not be bogged down on foolish issues that serve no one.

[ 35 : 00 ] Lord, we pray that they would be wise and not defend anything that would seek to undermine the family, undermine freedom of expression.

Lord, we pray that as we enjoy the freedom to preach your word publicly, Lord, we pray that we would continue to have that privilege and continue to have the privilege to speak out publicly on the things that you have laid on our hearts.

Lord, we ask all these things in Jesus' name and for his sake. Lord, we are undeniable.

Lord, we pray that we do. Lord, we pray that every time before we take care, Lord, we pray that every Dude is not that he can■■■■■