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# 1 Corinthians

**And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with *it*; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with *it*. 1 Corinthians 12:26**

In this verse, Paul completes his thoughts concerning the natural body and how each part interacts with the other parts. His words are a universally understood maxim. He says that "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." If a person is walking along in great shape and he suddenly stubs his toe on a rock (ouch!), the entire body will feel the pain, the entire body will be stopped in its motion, and the entire body will work in a harmonious fashion to effect healing.

Blood will be pumped, brain chemicals will be released, tears may be shed, lungs will fill with healing oxygen, etc. The left arm doesn't continue on the journey, leaving the rest of the body behind. The fingernails don't leave the body and decide to head back home. Rather, every part stays and each part accomplishes what is necessary to make things right. If the accident was a thorn instead of a rock, the fingernails will participate in the removing of the thorn. The left hand may hold the foot while the right hand does the pulling. Everything is joined in the effort of one hurting big toe.

Plato understood this when he wrote these words - "As in the body, when but a finger is hurt, the whole frame, drawn towards the soul and forming one realm under the ruling power therein, feels the hurt and sympathizes all together with the part affected" ("Republic," v., 462).

In the same way, when honor is bestowed upon a part of the body, something different occurs. Paul says that "if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with *it*." If the back is treated to a massage (oooooh, ahhhh!), the rest of the body shares in the sensation. The mind relaxes, the lungs quiet down to a slow pace, the arms stop worrying about the loads they normally carry. Their eyes get heavy and close in delight. It is a harmonious interaction of enormous satisfaction.

Life application: When someone in your church is negatively affected by life's trials, do you share in their miseries? When someone in your church is honored for their efforts along life's path, do you revel in their glory as well? This is what should occur. If we truly are a united body, then we should truly be united in that regard.

**Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.**

1 Corinthians 12:27

After having discussed the natural body and how each part functions in connection with the other parts, Paul now equates the church with the body. What was true with the natural body is certainly true with the spiritual body; there is an overall body which is comprised of individual members.

As he says, "Now you are the body of Christ." This isn't meant that the church in Corinth comprises the whole body. Rather, as a church, they are "the body" just as the church in Ephesus is "the body," and the Superior Word in (ever) sunny Sarasota, Florida is "the body." The church-universal, which is comprised of the church-individual, is what forms the body. In each church, there are individual members which then comprise the "members individually."

And of course, above all of these individual members is Christ as the Head of the church. This is the way the organization works. For far too long, individual denominations have claimed that they are the body and anyone outside of their denomination is not a part of the "true" church. Nonsense! The church is comprised of faithful believers in Christ. Never let the individual parts dictate the

truth about the whole. This is exactly what Paul has argued against for so many verses.

Life application: If you are in a church body that claims it is the only true church body, then you should probably find another place to worship. Christ Jesus is the unifying factor within the church, not man-made edicts and suppositions.

**And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:28**

After having described the properties of individual members, Paul now turns to the gifts possessed by those members. He gives similar lists elsewhere, but they may differ a bit and they may be in slightly different orders as well. However, for this list he notes that "God has appointed these in the church." The intent of this wording is to show that certain individuals have been granted certain gifts for the sake of the body.

He begins the list by stating "first apostles." These are the "sent ones" who were commissioned directly by the Lord for the purpose of witnessing to His work. They have been granted the highest position within the church and their era lasted until the completion of the Bible. The apostolic period of the church ended with the death of the last apostle. However, the writings of the apostolic period actually ends with the word "Amen" penned by John at the end of the book of Revelation. There are no apostles now, despite some claiming the term.

Paul shows that after the apostles come "prophets." The office of prophet holds two significations. The first is "foretelling." This is an utterance from the Lord about something future. It is a proclamation of something previously unknown. Although there may have been people with this gift at the time of the letter to Corinth, there is no need for this type of office now because the Bible is recorded.

Therefore, people who claim this as a gift do so from a very tenuous position, claiming "extra-biblical" revelation. The second type of prophet is "forth-telling." It is the interpretation and explanation of what has been recorded in the Bible. It is the job of faithful men of God who preach from the pulpit, or on the streets, or wherever else to the people. Where the word is proclaimed, the forth-telling of the word is being accomplished.

After prophets comes "teachers." This is similar to the forth-telling prophet (preacher), but it may involve less formal oration. It is similar to any type of classroom study. Questions may be asked and answers may be provided. The teaching gift is instrumental in the discipleship of others.

Paul then says "after that miracles" are next. A miracle is above and beyond what would normally be expected from a person; exceeding general capabilities. It is an active display of the power of God for the building up of the church.

However, there are those who have unusual abilities and who will claim their "gift" is from the Spirit. People can do an astonishing array of unique things, but this doesn't mean that their ability is a true spiritual gift. It can only be considered as such if its intent is to bring glory to God.

Next are "gifts of healings." These would be truly miraculous healings which come by faith through prayer. There is no reason to not believe in this gift today, but there is every reason to question it as it is presented. Charlatans fill the halls of Christianity, claiming this gift when they don't possess it. The best policy is to believe in "faith healing" but not in "faith healers." There are those who truly have faith that their prayers will be answered, and God truly hears their prayers and responds through effectual healing of the sick.

From there, Paul notes "helps." The Greek word is found only here in the New Testament. It is speaking of various types of aid, help, or assistance. Some may give money to help others; some may donate their particular skill (such as being

an electrician) to help out; some may have an abundance of time to help with various needs. Whatever the help needed is, the need is met in this type of gift.

Next is "administrations." Again, this Greek word is only found here in the New Testament. It is derived from the word "steer." People with this gift have the ability to steer the church just as a shipmaster can steer the ship. They are able to make sound choices concerning what should be done, when it should be done, and what direction should be taken for the benefit of the overall body.

Lastly, Paul notes that "varieties of tongues" are available as gifts. Tongues are known languages, not made up gurgling. Some possess the ability to speak other languages which may be needed as visitors come or as missionaries are sent. It is considered the least of gifts because it is a gift which can be acquired by most through study or immersion. It is also an ability that many have that aren't in the church. If all the members of the church speak the same language, there is no need for tongues to be spoken except perhaps to teach others the biblical languages or to teach others a language needed for mission work or the like.

It should be noted that there is often an overlap in the gifts individuals possess. Paul was an apostle, but he is also shown to have possessed other gifts listed here. An example is "healings." At times Paul healed others as is recorded in the book of Acts. However, there are times when Paul couldn't heal others. Therefore, it is obvious that this gift is something given by God for specific occasions and not for all times. In other words, "faith healers" are claiming an on-going gift where the Bible shows that it is not an on-going gift.

In the end, all gifts that are truly "gifts" are given by God for His purposes. Whatever our gift is, we should be thankful to the Lord for it and use it for His glory.

Life application: There is no true believer in Christ who doesn't possess an ability which can be described as a "gift." We can and should use our gift to the utmost of our ability for the purpose of bringing glory to God.

**Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?**  
1 Corinthians 12:29

Paul will close out this chapter with obvious questions concerning the structure and makeup of the body and then redirect those questions with a final thought before moving into chapter 13. These four questions follow directly in line with the appointments he noted in the previous verse which said, "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles." In the Greek, each of these first four was an individual appointment which was followed by an adverb which demonstrated a sort of hierarchical structure.

The obvious answer to each question was, "No." If all were apostles, then where would be the prophet, teacher, or worker of miracles? If all were prophets, then where would be the apostles for establishing church doctrine in accord with Christ's commands? Where would be the teachers to train up disciples? And where would be those who validated the word through miracles?

The same is true with each appointment. All are necessary, but none is sufficient to handle all of the needs and issues within the church.

Life application: What is your appointment within the church? You certainly have one and you should be carrying it out to the very best of your ability. If it seems like a lesser appointment than what another possesses, remember that they cannot do without you. Be satisfied that the Lord has you exactly where He wants you for His good purposes.

**Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?**  
1 Corinthians 12:30

Here, Paul finishes his list of gifts that have been disbursed among the body. In this, he lists two of the gifts that were lumped together without an adverb

separating them during his previous list. They are "healings" and "tongues." He also leaves out "helps" and "administrations" which were in that same combined list and he adds in the gift of interpreting.

These three should all be considered lesser gifts because of how they were kept separate from the previously noted gifts. Further, Paul will particularly speak about tongues and their interpretation as he continues later in chapter 14. There we will see that even at the time of the early church the gift of tongues was not being handled in an appropriate manner by the Corinthians. Because of this, he will give explicit instructions concerning this gift; instructions which have been completely ignored by most charismatic churches since the beginning of the charismatic movement.

Likewise, the abuse of the gift of "healings" has reached such an absurd level that churches often seem more like a comedy show than a true church in any real sense. In the abuse of these two gifts, there has been a complete lack of holiness, order, and honor for the exalted name of Jesus. If someone truly possesses the gift of healing, they will use it in a manner which highlights the Lord, not the possessor of the supposed gift. And if someone has the ability to speak in another language, they are to follow the explicit instructions for tongues given in chapter 14. If these aren't followed, then what is presented is not a gift, but rather an ostentatious show designed to call attention to oneself, not the Lord.

Life application: Paul's words are doctrine for the church. They were given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore any conduct in a church which contradicts or ignores his instructions cannot be of God.

**But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.**

1 Corinthians 12:31

Paul closes this chapter with a verse that looks back on what he has said and forward to what he will say. Chapter 12 has spoken of gifts of the Spirit, their distribution, their use, their interdependence on one another, and their state and

position within the body. Here he shows that there is nothing wrong and everything right with earnestly desiring the best gifts. As we grow in Christ and mature in our theology, it is right to strive for better gifts in order to benefit the church as a whole.

However, there are points that should be considered as we strive for the greater gifts.

- 1) We were accepted by Christ and may have possessed a "lesser" gift when accepted by Him.
- 2) The gift we possessed and the gift(s) we strive for are still gifts. They are available to us from an external source. Even if we spend or time perfecting a gift (teaching for example), it is God who gave us the time and the desire to do so. In the end, the gift must be credited to God.
- 3) Our greater gift(s) still require the gifts and the presence of all the other members in the church. Paul explained this in detail in the preceding verses.
- 4) If we possess a greater gift, it may actually receive less honor from the body than one who possesses a lesser gift. Again, Paul explained this before.

For these and certainly a host of other reasons, it is inexcusable to argue over the gifts we have been given; to lord them over others for any reason; or to feel that what we have is not as valuable as what others possess. The body is a single unit of many members which should have one ultimate goal and aim.

Because of this, Paul will enter into chapter 13 with one of the greatest discourses on the subject of love ever penned. The entire chapter will be devoted to this subject and it will be based on the material he has presented in chapter 12 concerning gifts. To introduce this new thought, he simply states, "And yet I show you a more excellent way." The "more excellent way" is love.

Life application: You have a gift, it is appropriate to your station in life and in Christ, and it can and does bring honor to the Lord as you use it to His glory.

**Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 1 Corinthians 13:1**

After a short note of something special coming in the preceding verse, Paul seems to suddenly interrupt the flow of the letter concerning controversial issues and begins a discourse on the necessity and power of love in order to overcome all obstacles. There is nothing out of place with this insertion, but rather it is a necessary component which is given to remind his audience that there is an overarching point upon which all other matters of doctrine should be subjected.

That this is a certain truth is confirmed by the words of the Lord Himself when He said this to an inquisitive lawyer concerning matters of the law -

"'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'<sup>38</sup> This is *the* first and great commandment. <sup>39</sup>And *the* second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 22:37, 38

Love is the central tenet of true worship and it is the heart of true fellowship between God and man and between man and man. Paul will describe what it means to be lacking this most important principle by beginning with, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels."

There are literally thousands of known languages in the world. These are "the tongues of men." Understanding and speaking more than one or two of them is a rare and valuable commodity. In some cultures, knowing several languages is more common than others because of interaction between other cultures, but there is always a limit to that interaction. The more languages a person knows, the more important they become as an asset to others as they speak words of trade, help, and even diplomacy.

The tongues of angels is not speaking of some unknown language that is beyond the reach of human knowledge. Nor is it speaking of unintelligible gurglings which people then claim is a divine spark of inspiration which then proves they have some special connection with the Holy Spirit. Rather, Hebrews tells us that angels are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"

Therefore, the tongues of angels is tied to their interaction with humans. They speak with authority because they are the messengers of God. They speak with care because they are ministering spirits for God's people. They speak with eloquence because they speak the words which are given through them by the Creator. The tongues of angels are known languages which carry the power and authority of God.

Paul notes that even if he speaks with these tongues which are powerful in and of themselves for effecting various purposes, "but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." The utter futility of possessing the power of the tongue is evident in the lack of love in the use of that tongue. Paul equates it to "a sounding brass." When a horn is blown, it makes a sound. It can even make a sound which is musical and pleasing to the ear. However, it is still an unintelligible sound. It is simply a tone of noise.

To speak without love is such a tone. In modern terms, we would call such noise "paying lip service." If there is a spoken word to the Lord, but there is no love behind the word, there is no true devotion to the Lord. If a person says he cares about a matter, but he doesn't follow up with actions which complement the words, then there is no true substance behind the words. In essence, he is like breath on a cold morning which simply fades out of sight.

Paul also calls this type of speech "a clanging cymbal." A cymbal clangs by being struck to make sound resonate off of it. Without there being harmony between the one striking the cymbal and the cymbal being struck, the noise will be offensive, not melodious. If a child bangs on a cymbal, it is annoying. However, if one who is mature and understands the structure of music and how to obtain the proper sound for the brass to make that music, it is both pleasing to the ears and

effective in its purpose, either by itself or in unison with others playing other instruments.

Without love, there is only noise without purpose. Without love, there is only disharmony and an unsettling din of noise. But with love, there is effective communication, edification, and peace between those who are communicating.

Life application: As Christians, we would do well to pay close attention to the words of 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and apply them to our lives. May God be pleased with hearts which act in love in agreement with the words spoken which profess that love.

**And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:2**

In continuance of the previous thought concerning tongues, Paul now moves to the gift of prophecy. This was esteemed as a higher gift than tongues by him in 1 Corinthians 12:27. He notes here that if he possesses this gift which would allow him to "understand all mysteries and all knowledge" there would still be a lack without love.

The term "mysteries" refers to that which was once unknown, but which has been revealed by God at the right time to continue to make known His plan of redemption. It is not specifically referring to predictions of things which will occur in the future, but rather to the revealing of anything that has or may occur and how that information fits into redemptive history. This idea is found in Deuteronomy 29:29 –

"The secret *things belong* to the LORD our God, but those *things which are revealed belong* to us and to our children forever, that *we may do all the words of this law.*"

Possessing such knowledge, or being able to discern such knowledge from His word, is not an end in and of itself. It is simply a gift like any other which needs to be accompanied by love. An example of this might be a very scholarly seminary professor. He understands the biblical languages and has great insights into the many patterns of Scripture which point to God's revealed plans. But if he doesn't truly love God or his word, all of his knowledge is ultimately futile. In the end, his temporary knowledge will be consumed by the march of time.

Paul continues with the thought that "though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." This isn't speaking of "saving faith" but rather the faith that "I can do all things." This is evidenced by the words "so that I could remove mountains."

As an example, a person may have great confidence that he can start a church, build it to a very successful ministry, work through all of the bureaucracy of building a large sanctuary, organize worship teams, pastoral teams, etc., so that he has the biggest ministry in town. Such a person is self-confident of his abilities and can "remove mountains." However, if he is doing it for self-aggrandizement or to simply get wealthy, all of his efforts are in vain. In the end, he will be no closer to true life than a pagan who worships in an idol's temple.

Life application: Great human achievement or possessing great wealth is not a sound indication of a great person. True greatness comes from a love for God, a love for the church of God's people, a heart for God's word, and a desire to glorify God in every aspect of life.

**And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.** 1 Corinthians 13:3

As Paul continues with his words concerning self-denial without accompanied love, he notes that "though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*" is something that others may find notable. In Greek, the term "bestow...to feed *the poor*" is one Greek word, *psomiso*. It indicates "to portion out" or "to give away by

mouthfuls." The use of this word is to show that if someone were to take every scrap of their existence and parcel it out as a way of obtaining the favor of God, or being elevated in the sight of men, it actually means nothing without love.

In this, we can think of people who live as monks who own nothing and act piously. As they receive, they hand it out to others. On the surface, this may seem noble and worthy of commendation, but this is a worthless existence that ends in futility unless it is done in love. If God isn't in their hearts and if there is no true sense of charity in their deeds, then they are simply wasting their lives. If one is exalted through deeds of piety in the eyes of others, it means that they have received their reward in full.

Paul goes on to say that "though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing." In the book of Daniel, the three children of Israel went to the flames rather than bow to a false god. Others throughout history have done the same. The burning of Christians in the early years of the faith was a common occurrence. Later, the Roman Catholic Church burned faithful believers at will. People such as John Hus gave themselves to the flames rather than bow to the church's wicked practices. These people gave their lives for the sake of Christ, standing on love for Him rather than love for this world.

However, Paul shows us that there is nothing intrinsically worthwhile in dying in this manner. Buddhist monks self-immolate from time to time in protest of certain events. However, this is a pointless death unless it is done with true love as its purpose. One can nobly die for another, preserving the other's life in exchange for their own, or one can die for their faith in Christ and their properly directed love of God. In this, there is a valid reason for going to the flames. But to simply die for the sake of dying, consigning oneself to the flames without a loving reason in mind, has no merit at all.

Life application: The greatest supposed acts of charity are completely worthless unless they are motivated by love. Without love, it is wasted effort.

**Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 1 Corinthians 13:4**

Starting in this verse, Paul will provide a host of the characteristics of love. Some will be passive, some will be active. Some will be positive, while others will be negative. They will provide contrasts, and they will provide parallel thoughts. By understanding love from these various angles, the perfections of love will be all the more evident, and those things which detract from love will be highlighted as well.

He is providing this list for the benefit of those in Corinth (and thus of us) particularly because several of these aspects have already been noted among the believers in this epistle. There has been jealousy, in-fighting, divisions, and a puffed-up attitude which he has had to correct. By defining true love, he will highlight what does and doesn't meet the description.

And so his list begins with "Love suffers long *and* is kind." Suffering is a passive action; being kind is an active one. Suffering long is something that requires perseverance, while being kind requires continued attention. He next says that "love does not envy." If someone achieves something great, those who exhibit love will not be jealous of their accomplishment, even if it is something they themselves had strived for. Rather than envy, rejoicing will be demonstrated.

Paul next says that "love does not parade itself, is not puffed up." Parading is showing off. If one truly loves, there is no need to put that love into the spotlight of life. Rather, the very nature of love is evident without ostentation. Being puffed up indicates pride and boasting. If we do something for another person in a true spirit of love, there is no need to sound out the deed for others to see. There will also be no desire to hold that deed over the person, reminding them of what was accomplished for them. Rather, the deed is rendered and it is not brought up again by the doer.

Life application: A life which is truly loving will demonstrate that state in a volitional manner. Even when tensions exist, they will continue to willingly place the perfections of love before those things which would be a hindrance to them. Occasionally coming to 1 Corinthians 13 and contemplating its words is a good way to always keep these precepts at the forefront of one's mind.