

## **A Healthy Body of Christ**

Romans 12:4-21

Last week pastor Jeff taught on helping spiritual children to grow into spiritual adults. This is important because one of the characteristics of spiritual children is that they are self-centered. Self-centeredness is not good because it shrinks God in our thinking and greatly enlarges the importance of us living for ourselves. In order for any of us to become adult Christians, we must learn to genuinely care about the needs of others; which is another way of saying we must love our neighbor.

OK, let's say we are all adult Christians and deeply care about the needs of others – how do we help others? What do we have to offer? The teaching of the New Testament is that every Christian has a spiritual gift and our gift is given to us by the Holy Spirit – so we can use it to serve others. Listen to **I Corinthians 12:7**,

“Now to each one the manifestation [a gift] of the Spirit is given for the common good” [for the good of

others – both believers and unbelievers].

The Apostle Paul takes the truth that we all have a spiritual gift, and puts it in the context of a human body. Listen to what he says in Romans 12:4-5,

“Just as each of us has one body [referring to our physical bodies] with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we who are many form one body [the body of Christ], and each member belongs to all the others.”

Ephesians 5:28 declares, “He who loves his wife loves himself.” Why? Because they have become one. When Christians love each other, that is a healthy way to love ourselves because we are all part of the Body of Christ. The human body is made up of many diverse parts, and each part has a function to perform if our bodies are to operate in an optimum way. The same is true of a church body. The Holy Spirit gives each person in a congregation a gift or an ability as He sees fit. And each person is to faithfully use his or her gift

on behalf of others in order for a body of believers to be healthy and able to faithfully represent Christ to this world.

Our diversity of gifts is why it is always silly for Christians to compare ourselves with one another. Paul speaks to this issue in **I Corinthians 12:4-6**,

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit [the Holy Spirit gives us different gifts so the body of Christ can function optimally].<sup>5</sup> There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord [there may be two Christians who have the same spiritual gift, but that gift is used by the Lord Jesus to function in different kinds of ministries].<sup>6</sup> There are different kinds of effects, but the same God [the Father who] works all of them in all men.”

I love the fact that Paul incorporates the Triune God in what he just said. The bottom line is that there may be two Christians with the same spiritual gift, being used in the same kind of ministry, but with different effects. Do you see why it is a waste of time to compare ourselves with others? We are all a part of the

same body, but we have different functions to fulfill.

Question: How do people with different gifts, used in different ministries, with different effects – work together harmoniously? The Apostle Paul explains this in **I Corinthians 12:12-13**,

“The body [the human body] is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many [and diverse], they form one body. So it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For we were all baptized [placed] by one Spirit [the Holy Spirit] into one body – [the Body of Christ] whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” [to indwell us].

At the time of salvation – all Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and placed by the Holy Spirit into Christ. In other words, followers of Christ make up the Body of Christ here on earth. We are the hands and feet of Jesus. The ascended Lord Jesus is the head, the brains, the boss of His body. We are to do as He directs us to do. Obviously, we must work together just as the many parts of our bodies work together. To help that

happen, we all serve the same Lord Jesus and possess the same Holy Spirit.

Do you think the Holy Spirit is ever at odds with Himself? Does He ever fight against Himself? That would be bizarre. When I was growing up, my grandmother operated a nursing home out of her house. There were some wonderful people under her care that I met over the years. And there were also some troubled people. One man in particular I will never forget. He would sometimes become agitated and get into some kind of internal argument with himself and then end up slapping himself in the face – very hard and quite often. During those dark times, He loathed and hurt himself. Friends, God the Holy Spirit, that all Christians share in common, never loathes Himself and never works against Himself. Which means if I can't get along with a brother or sister in Christ, then one or both of us are not obeying the Holy Spirit. If we are both obeying the

Holy Spirit, then we will work together very well.

Let me carry out Paul's body metaphor a little further. Supposing that my right arm decides it is working far too hard and therefore takes a year sabbatical. What would that mean for the rest of my body? All the other parts are going to have to work extra hard to help me function. And even when they do work extra hard, I will still not be able to carry out my daily obligations as effectively as when all my body parts are working together. Does that make sense?

Here is my question: Are each of you giving of your time and talents to help this local expression of Christ's body function properly. If just one part of the body goes awol, the whole body is adversely affected. My point in all this – is that adult, mature Christians, use their time and gifts on behalf of others. This quality helps local churches to be healthy and effective in making Christ known.

Unfortunately, anyone who has worked in churches very long, discovers the 20/80 phenomenon. Do you know what I am talking about? It is the sobering reality that 20% of the people in a congregation do 80% of the work. 20% also give 80% of the money. And 20% get 80% of God's blessings. What God wants is for everyone to use their gifts and fulfill their functions, so that a church can best represent Christ to its community.

From all outward appearances it looks as if 80% of most congregations believe there are more important ways for them to use their gifts, their time and their money. It appears that 80% of Christians do not believe the church plays a very important role in this world. What a contrast to how God views the Church. Listen to some of the ways God refers to the Church in the New Testament. Besides being called the Body of Christ, the Church is also referred to as Bride of Christ, the Temple of God, a chosen people, a royal

priesthood, a holy nation . . . . There is no other entity on earth that is given such endearing names and lofty titles.

Let me be quick to say that families, with dads and moms and children are highly valued in the Bible. But when you think about it, the most important goal of believing parents is to help their children become a part of the Body of Christ. Why is that so important? Because we want our children to be a part of God's eternal family – and because the function of the Church is to help rescue lost people from Satan's domain of darkness, so they can be transferred into Christ's kingdom of light. And yes there is a battle going on between those two kingdoms. Christ wants to work through the Church – His Body – to **change lost peoples' eternal destinies** AND to **change the world** by having His kingdom of light expand all over the world – at the expense of Satan's kingdom of darkness.

Let me summarize: From God's perspective, there is no other entity on earth as important as the Church. But if the Church is to function properly, spiritual babies need to grow into children, and children need to grow into adults – who stop focusing on themselves and learn to minister to others with their gifts and time. If this happens, Christ's kingdom on earth will grow.

Let me share a reason why many Christians do not believe the Church is very important. It is a reason that even adult Christians embrace. Here is the dilemma: Many Christians are convinced that the Church will fail to make any difference in this world because in their understanding of the Bible – the world is doomed to get worse and worse, until it becomes a giant cesspool of evil, which the Lord Jesus will destroy when He comes to raise the dead at the end of this New Covenant Age. That sounds to me as if the forces of hell will prevail against the Church, even though Jesus said the

opposite. That thinking doesn't inspire a person to highly value the Church, or to hit the ground running in the morning. After all, if the Bible decrees that the world is going to get worse, why not just stay in bed – or dig a tunnel and live underground? This is a very foreign mind-set to what the Apostle Paul champions in Romans 12:6-8,

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith [but use every drop of his gift].<sup>7</sup> If it is serving, let him serve [the idea is with all his might]; if it is teaching, let him teach;<sup>8</sup> if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

The motivation for enthusiastically using our gifts to help others is out of love and gratitude to God for redeeming us out of Satan's slave market of self-centeredness. This is why the Apostle Paul now goes on to talk about the characteristics of Godly love –

which is the polar opposite of self-centeredness. It is difficult to read verses 9-21, and try to justify living a lukewarm Christian life. What Paul says in these verses is an excellent description of a healthy, adult Christian,

“Love must be sincere [adult Christians sincerely love others and they] . . . Hate what is evil [that is a strong word. Christians are not to remain neutral concerning lawlessness – which destroys families, communities and nations]; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves [we cannot be self-centered and pull that off]. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor [at a boiling point], serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope [our hope is not only that we get to go to heaven, but we also get to bless all the nations while we are on that journey. The fact that Christians will bless all the nations is an unconditional, irrevocable promise from God repeated in both the Old and New Testament], patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another [which should not be difficult since we all share the same Holy Spirit].

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited [my brother used to assure me that he wasn't conceited, because conceit is a fault, and he had no faults].<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody [friends, there are some truths and character qualities that everyone agrees are right; for example – loving others. And there are other truths that people do not agree on – hate what is evil. I hate Satan, the author of evil. I do not hate people who are held captive in Satan's domain of darkness].<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.<sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' [I think Paul may be saying that we are supposed to help our enemy, even if it angers him to have to admit that a follower of Christ helped him].<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

This is a description of the attitudes and behaviors of mature, adult Christians. If what Paul is describing here seems totally unreasonable and unattainable, then we

need to grow more in Christ. Let me ask a question at this point: If Christians lived this way, which is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, do you think we would impact our neighborhoods and communities? Do you think we would be culture-changing Christians? Of course we would. The fact that the Christianity in America today, is not affecting our culture as much as it should, means we do not have enough adult Christians; which means we have too many Christians stuck in infancy and childhood.

How did Jesus grow His disciples into adult, mature Christians? By forming them into a small group, and then pouring His life into them. The kind of small group Jesus formed had authenticity and transparency. When Jesus was only hours away from crucifixion, look at His transparency in **Matthew 26:38**, “Then he said to them [Peter, James and John], ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep

watch with me.’” There was also accountability.

Listen to **Mark 9:33-35**,

“They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’<sup>34</sup> But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest [Jesus was getting ready to die on the cross for those men, and they were busy arguing about who among them was the most important].<sup>35</sup> Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all’ [Jesus took a failure on the part of the disciples and turned it into a valuable teaching moment].”

Those twelve men were a priority for Jesus. This becomes very clear when we read **Mark 9:30-31**,

“They [Jesus and His twelve disciples] left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were,<sup>31</sup> because he was teaching his disciples.”

In the eyes of the world’s elite, the disciples of Jesus were unimpressive people. But because they followed Jesus and became mature disciples, they helped to

change the world. Many of you feel that your gifts and your station in life are not conducive for achieving anything significant. Listen again to the Old Testament reading for this morning – taken from **II Kings 5:1-3**,

“Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram [Syria]. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded . . . but he had leprosy. <sup>2</sup> Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel [it is hard for me to think of a worse fate than to be kidnaped from your parents and homeland and taken to be a slave in a land not your own], and she served Naaman’s wife [how easy it would be for this girl to have become a bitter, angry person]. <sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, [I hate you] ‘If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria [Elisha]! He would cure him of his leprosy.’”

I believe what this young slave girl said to her owner was heeded because of her character and her love for others. And since Elisha was faithful to use his gifts, Naaman was healed and saved and the Syrians came to know there was a God in Israel. If we are all faithful to use our gifts and abilities for the good of others, this

world will be a better place. Let's pray.