

“Indispensable”

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 | Rev. Stephen Johnson

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1 Corinthians 12:12-27. As I mentioned previously, Pastor Chris is out sick today, and so even though we won't be starting at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, I've decided to preach on a different part kind of Paul's letter as an appetizer before we begin the main course next week. And just as appetizers are small, today we'll focus only on one word in 1 Corinthians 12, the word “indispensable.” So as we read the text, let's see how Paul uses that word and how it can give us a paradigm shifting perspective on how we view each and every member of our church.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (ESV)

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. ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

²¹ 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.” ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Let's pray.

In his books On the Origin of Species and The Descent of Man, Charles Darwin wrote about parts of the human body that he considered to be “rudimentary” or “aborted,” organs of the

body that used to have a function for our supposed evolutionary ancestors, but now have no function whatsoever. They are useless. Darwin thought that not only could people live without these organs, these organs serve no purpose at all for a person. These parts were later called “vestigial organs” by those who followed in Darwin’s thinking, because they were vestiges, “leftovers” from ancient hominoid ancestors. So which parts did Darwin think had no function? Wisdom teeth, the coccyx or tailbone, the appendix, certain muscles in the ear, body hair, and more. Now since Darwin, science has come to find that each of these parts do have a function, be it ever so small, though there still is some debate and mystery. Take the appendix for instance. WebMD published an article in 2007¹ saying that the appendix may have the purpose of protecting good bacteria in the gut. The article even said it was “designed” to do so. Well brothers and sisters, if something was designed, there had to be a Designer, right? And as Christians we believe that there aren’t vestigial organs, but that God made man unique from the animals and each of our parts have purpose.

Now my goal in bringing this up is not to walk through the scientific arguments against vestigial organs and Darwinian evolution, but to draw an analogy for us. As a church, do we often live like there are vestigial members of the body of Christ, like there are disposable, dispensable, unnecessary persons with little to no function in the church? God wants to change our perspective to His perspective. How does He see people in the church who seem to have little or no function within the body? He calls them “*indispensable*.”

“**Indispensable.**” That means absolutely necessary, something you can’t do without. So how is this true? How is it that the weaker members of the body are indispensable to the rest of the body? How are they really and truly indispensable to each of us and not just abstractly or mysteriously? Paul isn’t giving them an empty compliment just to make them feel better. The word “indispensable” really means what it says. So my hope today is to put some meat on the bones of that word, to transform our perspectives of ourselves and one another. We’ll consider three points:

First, let’s consider The World’s Perspective that seeps into the Church: the tendency to view ourselves or others as *dispensable*. Second, let’s consider God’s Perspective of the Church: that even the weaker members are *indispensable*.

¹ <https://www.webmd.com/digestive-disorders/news/20071012/appendix-may-have-purpose#1>

And third, let's consider How Jesus Transforms Our Perspectives.

Before we look at these three main points, let's look at the context of this passage. 1 Corinthians was a letter written by the Apostle Paul in about AD 55 to a very messy church in Corinth. There were gross sins that would shock just about anybody. There were divisions in the church, people taking sides with their favorite Bible teacher. These Christians were united to evil people in their church that they should have been divided from and they were divided from other Christians that they should have been united to. It was a mess. Some thought they were better than others, others wished they had different, more visible gifts that were more attractive and honorable. Paul knew that the church would never unite unless these worldly perspectives changed.

And so Paul gives the famous analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 of the body of Christ. Here's verse 12, **"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."** Christ has one body with many members, and that body is his people, the Church. In the body of Christ there is a unity and a diversity. Christ's body is the unity, a singular whole. The parts of the body are the diversity. Unity and diversity.

In the next verse Paul explains how we enter into the body of Christ: **¹³ 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."** To join the body of Christ, we must be baptized into it; but this baptism isn't water baptism. Paul says we must be baptized in the Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is when He regenerates us, makes us spiritually alive, and we are born again. Through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we are united to Jesus forever, becoming a member of his body. Now there is a link between this baptism and water baptism. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the spiritual reality that water baptism points to. So it is through the Holy Spirit that we are united to Christ and his body, made spiritually alive and enabled to repent of our sins and believe on Jesus.

So that's the general context for our passage.

1. The World's Perspective

That brings us to our first point. Let's consider the world's perspective that all too often seeps into our minds. Look now at verse 14: **¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one**

member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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?

The world’s perspective of weak people is that they aren’t needed, they’re just a burden. They should aspire to become more useful, more productive, more influential, more visible, more attractive. Your worth is found in how others see you. When this worldly, fleshly perspective overcomes someone in the church, they become insecure. Fearful. They begin to compare themselves with others in the church, with those who are really gifted in some kind of way. They don’t want to be different than others in the church, they want gifts and abilities like others. And perhaps they begin to think that sameness and uniformity of gifts and skills in a church is better than diversity. But is it?

The one body of Christ is a diversity of members and it is no mystery to anyone that with more diversity comes more complications. The more people there are and the more different they are, the more we can expect various preferences, different needs, and misunderstandings. The challenges of diversity, as stressful as they may be, are but a small price to pay for the beauty of the body of Christ when all its different parts are working together as God designed it to be. In fact, the more homogenous a church is, the more it caters to one demographic of people or subculture or interests or spiritual giftedness, the more unhealthy and divided the church becomes. Churches that split services, with one service being “traditional” and one service “contemporary” are splitting the body and actually hurting it by removing the opportunity for people to love each other and give up their preferences for one another. Some churches put top value on mercy ministries and neglect teaching and evangelism, or vice versa, and they’re more unhealthy and divided because of it. *Love* builds up the church, the whole church, it does not indulge selfish preferences or cater to one demographic. Loving people that are different than you is a test to see whether you just love yourself or if you genuinely love your brothers and sisters. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, **“If you love those who love you, what reward do you have, do not even the tax collectors do the same?”** (Matt. 5:46).

So right now ask yourself these questions: do I have a worldly perspective of myself and my role in the body of Christ? Do I view myself as dispensable and unneeded? Do I

view anybody else in this church in that way? Do I grumble that I'm too different than other people, that there aren't enough people like me in this church?

2. God's Perspective of the Church

Now let's consider our second point from this text: God's Perspective of the Church. God's perspective is that the members of the body of Christ, even the weaker ones, are *indispensable*. Verse 18: **"¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body."**

It is God Himself who has made each member what it is with its own particular function. We often forget this and put a ton of pressure on ourselves for not being as gifted as other people. Here's some counsel from John Calvin, *"Each member ought to rest satisfied with its own place and station, and not envy the others... That member, therefore, which will not rest satisfied with its own station, will wage war with God* (pp. 409-10)." Let's not fight with God. Rest in how He's designed you, how he's gifted you. See how God uses you, directly and indirectly, to build up His body. You contribute more than just the money you bring to the offering. Verse 21: **"²¹ 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.' ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require."**

No part can say it has no need of another part. For those parts that *seem* to be weaker, *seem* to be less honorable, *seem* to be less presentable are, actually, *indispensable*. All the parts, even the so-called weaker parts are absolutely necessary; they are essential for the wellbeing of the whole body. Therefore, the parts that may seem weaker are to be treated by the church with greater honor and modesty.

Let's now narrow our focus from the whole of the body to those who may seem to be weaker members, those whom God calls **"indispensable."** First we will consider who these members are and then we will see how they truly are essential.

So who are these indispensable members? There are some members who are legitimately weak because of their sin or their suffering or their immaturity. Those members may be needy or lacking wisdom or knowledge or skills. They may be sick, dying,

poor, disabled, depressed, overwhelmed, or fearful. Or perhaps they may be acting foolishly, lacking self-control, stuck in some cycle of sin or addiction or perhaps they're theologically immature or way off in their theology and have a weak conscience or a weak faith. From a fleshly, worldly perspective these people are viewed as less honorable, shameful, or unpresentable. *But that is not how we should see each other in the church.* These members are not vestigial organs, useless members. These members are still a functioning part of the body.

We often think that once you're a "weaker member" of the body, that's where you stay and that's your forever role in the church and you can't change it. And sometimes we think that the elders and deacons and other leaders are never to be considered weaker members of the body. These ideas are not true. Our function within the body of Christ is *dynamic*. It can change. Sometimes the stronger members of the body fall into a season of sin or suffering and need much more help from the body than what they can give. We go through different seasons in life, some very dark when we desperately need the church. We were all infants at one time, completely dependent on others and one day we will be dying and once again completely dependent on others. So when we think about those who are weaker, let's think about ourselves, when we were weak in the past, how we may be weak now, and how one day we too may be weak.

So now that we've thought on who the weaker members are, how is it that they are truly *indispensable*? Is Paul just exaggerating to make those members feel better? Absolutely not. Here are just four ways of many that the weaker yet indispensable members build up the church.

The first reason why the weaker members are indispensable is that they help unify the body. We see this in our text today, verses 24-26. **"But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that [this word indicates purpose, God's purpose for honoring all the parts of the body, in order that] there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."** When there is a diversity of members treating each other with honor and without partiality, it unifies the body. Diversity + Mutual Honor = Unity. John Calvin stresses this point in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, saying, *"The unity of the body is of such a nature as cannot be maintained*

but by a diversity of members;" (pg. 410). That's a pretty bold statement, and I think it's true. Diversity of members maintains and preserves the unity of those members.

When there are weaker members in a church, it gives the church the opportunity to unite together and honor and help that weaker member. I'm sure you've seen time and time again when someone is in need and the church rallies around to help them and honor them. Someone has a baby or is in the hospital or is struggling financially. When someone has a need, it provides an opportunity members to unite together to help and restore honor to that person, to share life with them, to give to them and to enjoy that relationship with them.

A **second** way that the weaker members build up the body is in how they provide an opportunity for others to receive grace. What I mean by this is that when the other members love those who are weak and seek to help them, those members need God's help to do that, and so they turn to Christ for grace to help them as they help the weaker member. This is an indirect way that a weaker member builds up the church, but it is still important nonetheless. The stronger members are not strong within themselves - that's a worldly perspective. They are strong because of Christ's strength, as Ephesians 6:10 says, **"Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might."** When we as weaker members allow a brother or sister to help us, to love us, we are putting them in a position to where they need to depend on God for help, for wisdom, for humility, for finances, whatever it may be. Think about it. If we didn't have weaker members, we wouldn't need to rely on God as much, *and our faith would be weaker*. Sometimes we think that weaker members are just getting in our way from doing God's kingdom work, that they are slowing us down or distracting us. The moment you begin to think this way is the moment you have actually taken your eyes off of the kingdom work God has placed right in front of you and are instead looking toward achieving your own selfish ambition, your own kingdom.

Now some of you may say, "I don't want to be a burden. I'm fine. Let the church help the people who really need it." I want to push back on that way of thinking for just a little bit if I could. Galatians 6:2 says, **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."** If you don't want to be a burden, then how are the others in the church going to fulfill the law of Christ and love you? Let others help carry your burden. Bless them with your burden. Let them love you. Build a bond with them. Let Christ love you through them. Let God bless them with His Spirit's help so that they can help you. Don't let pride keep you

from letting others love you. We all need to grow in love – so let others grow in love by letting them love you. Stop pretending your self-sufficient Christian. They don't exist.

A **third** way that weaker members are absolutely necessary for the building up of the church is that they remind the other believers of their own weak spiritual condition before God. When you see someone struggling with sin or suffering or when you see a young child, you're seeing a picture of yourself and your true condition before God. We are all children before God, we have all been wayward and wasteful, we are all foolish in light of God's wisdom, we are all constantly needy for His help, we are all poor and sick and our bodies are wasting away. Even when we are strong we are not actually all that different from the weaker members of the body. So be reminded of your weak spiritual condition before God.

A **fourth** way that weaker members build up the body is that they give the rest of the body a longing for Christ's return. When we share in the life of a struggling saint, our perspective shifts from seeing this world just as a fun place to live and explore, to seeing the miseries and sufferings of this life, that this world is not our home, that we are exiles and pilgrims, and it pushes us to groan and pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

One of my best friends growing up lived across the street from me and went to my church and youth group. He was a strong believer. We eventually lived together when I was in seminary in our mid-twenties and it became clear during that time that he was becoming very fearful, even paranoid. He couldn't hold a job. He rarely went to church. Then after a few tragic events he was hospitalized in a locked psychiatric stabilization unit and diagnosed with a chronic mental illness. When I speak with him now, I try to continue to encourage him and I still see that God has a hold on his heart and life, but it makes me groan for Christ to come back and heal him and bring him back to his right mind. It pains me to see him continue to suffer and I want Christ to make all things new again. Seeing the suffering of our brothers and sisters weans us from this world and makes us long and pray for Christ's return. That longing for Christ's return is absolutely essential to our Christian life.

3. How Jesus Transforms Our Perspectives

So we've seen how we can be influenced by a worldly perspective, and if we're honest, we see we're guilty of it. And we've seen God's perspective of the members of the body, and if we're honest, we may feel we have a ways to go in seeing people how God does.

So feeling guilty and a little overwhelmed is expected. So how does Jesus lift these burdens? What promises do we have in Christ? How does Jesus give us the grace to transform our perspective to His perspective so we can love each other well here at Trinity? Turn with me to Romans 15:1-7. At the end of the book of Romans, Paul writes about how the church is to relate to weaker members of the body. Romans 15, starting in verse 1: **“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”**

We see a command here to bear with the failings of the weak and to deny ourselves of our own pleasures and comfort in the course of helping the weak. But this command doesn't come out of nowhere. It is founded on the death of Christ. Christ did not please Himself when He endured the beatings and mockings and the and long death on the cross. He denied Himself for us who were weak, us who were His enemies. We were dispensable, the refuse of the world, and He who was truly indispensable became dispensable for us - he was cut off from His people and dishonored and disposed, that we might be redeemed and brought into His body and have an honorable purpose within His body. Let this love that Christ had for you become so real to your hearts that it transforms how you see yourself and each other. Meditate on Christ's sacrificial love for you, let it humble you and eat away at any worldly perspective you may have of yourself and others in the church, and then go and consider how to build up your neighbor.

Now for those who may feel like this is an overwhelming task, be encouraged, you are not alone. God has promised to help. Look at verses 5-7 to see what God has promised to us as we go forth and love each other with Christ's love: **⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”** Christ has welcomed us, so let us welcome one another, whether we are in a season of strength or a season of weakness. Let's love one another and let's let others love us. And in doing so, we will become more unified, and Christ will become more glorified.

Let's pray.