

Work is Worship – 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Discussion Guide

Background

1 Corinthians is a letter written by Paul to the Church in the city of Corinth. Many commentators compare ancient Corinth to New York City. In the first century, Corinth was a large and important city located along several prominent trade routes, creating a lively melting pot of people from many different places and cultures. The city had been restored by Roman “freedmen” (former slaves) about 100 years prior to Paul’s writing, who were seeking a place to pursue economic and social privileges not available to them in other places. This helped create a culture of “upward mobility,” and a strong drive among many Corinthians to achieve financial and social success as they defined it.

These cultural values carried into the church, and Paul writes this letter to address a number of different conflicts between the Corinthians. In Chapters 12-14, Paul talks about spiritual “gifts” in the church, because some believers felt that their gifts (especially the gift of speaking in tongues) were more important, and/or made them a more important part of the community.

In order to address this, Paul uses the metaphor of the body with its many different parts. Other philosophers and rhetoricians would use the image of the body to describe society, but they did so in a way that was meant to keep those with lower class/social standing “in their place” – i.e. if you’re a foot, that’s where you belong, so don’t complain or try to change things. Paul flips the metaphor on its head, and argues that each individual part of the body is equally important to the body’s functioning. In the same way, each individual member of the church, with their unique gifts and abilities, are essential to the Body of Christ functioning as God intended. Thus, some gifts are not “better” or more important than others. Each and every person is a valued contributor.

Paul speaks against the Corinthians and their natural tendency to jockey for position and influence. He reminds them that when one part of the body suffers, everyone suffers (v. 26). Instead of competing with each other, the believers should seek to bless and encourage each other, and help one another develop the unique gifts and abilities they have been given.

There are several passages in the NT where Paul lists/describes spiritual gifts. None are meant to be exhaustive, but simply illustrative of the different ways God blesses people. Some are gifted with charismatic spiritual gifts (tongues, insight in prayer, etc). However, equally important are gifts of hospitality, administration, organization, skilled work, etc. We do not always think of our personality traits or inclinations as “gifts,” but they are part of the way God designed us, and part of the way we display His image out into the world.

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Discussion Questions

- 1) How is our culture like the culture of Corinth in the first century?
- 2) Why do you think Paul used the image of a body in this passage?
- 3) Do you tend to value certain roles/kinds of work over others? Where did that message come from?
- 4) What tools/resources can help you know and understand your gifts better?
- 5) How can you call out/support the gifts and talents of others in our church family?
- 6) Is there some way that God is asking you to make a change, in order to better use the gifts and talents He has given to you?