

1 CORINTHIANS: A 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

Victory of the Lamb Lutheran Church

Body Building with Equal Honor

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Just in the past 50 years the sport of bodybuilding has dramatically increased in America. And that means there is a lot more competition. In fact there are actually many different categories of bodybuilding competitions. Some stress natural training methods, some don't allow steroid or other substances, some competitions include fitness tests, there's even a specific category for teenage bodybuilders and senior bodybuilders, so it's not too late for anyone! Now I used to think that the only thing that mattered in bodybuilding was being the biggest, but that's not true. Especially in many of these natural bodybuilding competitions, the name of the game is proportion. In other words, if you have softball size biceps, but you can fit into a pair of skinny jeans you aren't going to do well. I watched a competition online this week to learn a little more about it and most of those people have muscles in places that I didn't know humans had muscles. I don't know how the judges decide which one is superior because they all look so strong! That's why if bodybuilder wants to win they must understand the value and significance of every single part of their body. Every single muscle is important. At the highest level you can even lose if one muscle is slightly too big in proportion to the rest. Even the smallest muscles can be the difference between winning and losing.

Today in 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul teaches us about "Body Building". But his idea of bodybuilding is a little different. In the first 11 verses of chapter 12 that Pastor Ben preached on last week, the apostle Paul explained that God gives out diverse gifts to his people and yet wants them to be united as his Church. Now in verses 12-31, Paul compares that diverse unity of the Church with a human body. Listen to how Paul introduces this illustration in verses 12-14.

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles (heritage and culture doesn't divide), slave or free (social status doesn't divide the church, we are all equal here!)—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many." Just as a human body, the Christian Church is a single organism composed of many different parts. Though we each may be very different, with different spiritual gifts, together, not apart, we make up one, united, body. And God honors every member of his body equally. As an experienced bodybuilder, God honors each one of us as necessary to the development the body, no matter who we are, and no matter what kind of gifts we have.

Now unfortunately, Paul brought all this up because the body of Christ in Corinth was not developing so well. Their body was not exactly healthy; it was suffering from two combating diseases that had to do with their Spiritual gifts. Two diseases that everyone of us here today might find that we suffer from sometimes. The first disease is called "*Honor-Deficiency-Disorder*." Apparently some of the people didn't feel included or honored in the Corinthian church. They saw people with the gift of tongues, or the gift of prophecy, or healing—some of the more dramatic, outward gifts—and they thought, "I can't do that. Maybe I don't belong here." And their symptoms were a direct result of the other disease that was plaguing their church. The other disease is called, "*Extra-honor-it is*." You see the people in the congregation who had those dramatic, supposedly-more-honorable gifts felt superior because of them. Whether by words or actions this gave the impression, "If you don't have honorable gifts like we do, then you probably don't need to be here."

Both of these sicknesses, "*Honor-Deficiency-Disorder*" and "*Extra-honor-it is*," can be found in any church. Even here at Victory of the Lamb, which I think is a church that is good at utilizing gifts, they are present. Now I don't think that they are as obvious, but they are here. People with HDD are here: Maybe you're an introvert and it's hard to talk to new people, but everyone at church seems to be talking with each other quite easily, so you think, "That's really not my cup of tea, I don't know if I should be here." Perhaps you see the musicians up here and you think, "Wow, I wish I could play music in front of people. If only I had a more honorable role here at church." Maybe you're sitting there thinking right now, "I don't know if I have any honorable gifts to use at this church, do I really belong here?" And on the other side of the coin perhaps some of us here have EH, "Wow, I was able to use my gifts today! What an honorable position I have! I got to preach today, I am really contributing to the development of the Body of Christ. I'm an active member of the ministry team and it feels so good to play a part here." Now these mindsets aren't bad in and of themselves, but

the impression they give can be damaging—as if someone who doesn't do anything for the Sunday service has a less honorable role in the Body of Christ, or even that the Body of Christ only matters on Sunday Morning in this building.

Yes I believe HDD and EH are ailing VOTL just as they were the congregation at Corinth. So let's look at how Paul handles these problems. He prescribes the cure for "*Honor-Deficiency-Disorder*" in verses 15 and 16: **"Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body."** In this part of the illustration, the foot and the ear compare themselves to the hand and the eye, and in their own estimation they view their own gifts as being of less value, or being of no value at all, in comparison to the gifts of the others. But notice that just because they think that they don't belong, doesn't mean they don't have a place. That is an important truth! *It is not what we think that maintains our status as part of the body; God alone makes us part of his body.* Keep that in mind as we go along.

Paul continues in verses 17-20: **¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.** The very existence of the body depends on the union and cooperation of individual members that each carry out different functions. It wouldn't be a body if it was just one part! "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?" One big eyeball is not a body! One giant eye would be completely useless, not to mention pretty freaky! Just think how dependant a human eye is: an eye requires the support of the eye socket within the skull, it requires the connecting nerve fibers to relay its information to the brain, and it even requires the eye lid and tear-ducts to provide moisture and protection. The eyeball cannot perform in isolation; it must have the support of the other members of the body in order to be valuable. And even the eyeball itself is composed of millions of smaller parts that are formed to make a single organ. The human body is incredibly interdependent and the church is no different.

This truth provides the antidote to "*Honor-Deficiency-Disorder*." Some of you may see yourself as insignificant, but the truth is that you are just as necessary to the proper functioning of the body as one of the more showy parts. Pastors need their members as much as members need a pastor. If we had five drummers over there the music would be well . . . that might actually be pretty cool. More seriously, you may not understand how important you are to the body of Christ until you get to heaven, but the Lord promises that you are just as important as anyone else here. God has carefully placed, arranged, and connected us as members of his body. He has a purpose for you in his body and he will use you and your personality and your gifts, as hidden as you may think they are, to further his Kingdom. Remember that the Body functions all the time, not just here on Sundays. Yes, as you support God's work here at church you are being used as part of the body, but also outside of church. As you are a hard worker at your job, as you show God's love to your family and friends, as you pray for others, in all these ways and so many more, you are functioning as a member of God's body. Maybe not as noticed, not as praised by people, but equally honored and cherished by God our Father. You are part of the body of Christ, whether you always feel like it or not!

Now let's look at how Paul treats "Extra-Honor-itis." Verses 21-24a, **²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment.** It is hard to know exactly which parts of the body Paul is referring to here, but the main point is that we give certain parts of our bodies more or less honor and different treatment based on what they do and how presentable they are. And as the Apostle continues he shows that this is where the human body and the Church, as the body of Christ, differ.

Verses 24b-26: **"But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.** Even though we do not give honor to the supposedly inferior parts of our body, God does bestow honor on people whose outward gifts may seem inferior. The body of Christ is equal in honor from head to toe, inside and out. This is a really encouraging truth, and one which the Corinthians did not understand. They failed to appreciate their members who lacked the spectacular or showy gifts. The members with less noticeable ministries were devalued and neglected in favor of the dramatic members. They did not understand that God does not behave this way; he especially honors the lowly. And so should we as fellow members of the Body of Christ!

If you do have a noticeable, outward, role here at Victory of the Lamb, please remember that you are a part of a larger body. Your value and honor does not come from the work you do, but from our God who made you part of his body. Therefore celebrate all the gifts of this church. Go out of your way to thank others who make your work possible. And for as many compliments as you receive, go the extra mile to make those whose gifts are hidden feel just as honored as you do. That isn't going to be easy, but this is how the body of Christ is supposed to operate! We should have equal concern for each other, equal suffering, and equal rejoicing. This is what we all should strive for.

In the end, though, just trying harder isn't going to get us very far. Both HDD and EH are woven into our human nature. They are all around us in the secular world where we are honored, more or less, completely based on the type of gifts we have. And the devil wants us to apply that earthly honor system to the Body of Christ. He whispers to us and says, "If God really thought you were worth more he would have given you more honorable gifts!" or, just as damaging, he says, "God obviously values you more because you have such an honorable role in his church."

Martin Luther once said that the Christian life is like a drunk man riding on a donkey. At first he leans too far to one side until he falls off. And then when he gets back on he says, "I certainly don't want to fall off that side again!" And so he leans the other way until he falls off that side. If we buy into the Devil's lie that God honors us based on our gifts, we will continue fall off the donkey. We will live, being batted back and forth from pride to envy, from overconfidence to despair, based on how honored we feel by others. And the devil doesn't mind which side you fall off as long as the Body of Christ is not functioning and developing. As long as God can't build his body.

Instead of just trying harder, we need to stay focused on our Savior who builds his Body with equal honor. Your value was already established as soon as you became a member of the body of Christ. Your honor is established not in your position or specific gift, but simply in being connected to Jesus. Jesus was the one who never honored people based on the world's standards. Remember when he ate with the tax collectors and the sinners? Remember how he often told the gifted Pharisees that they were hypocrites, instead of buttering them up to gain approval? In fact, he never cared about being honored by the world. He just wanted us to be honored by his Father. And to that end, he let himself be convicted as a criminal! He was shamed with the spit and mockery of soldiers; he was dishonored in every way for our sake. And God placed on him all of our sins, so that we might have the honor that was due him. We are all equally honored by the fact that the head of our Body, Jesus himself, thought that each of us were worth dying for. And in the end, it is Christ whom we seek to honor as his body. It is hard to care about how much or how little honor you're given by other people when your entire purpose is to honor Jesus. He is the real cure.

We finish with the final verses of our text today, 27-30. **²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?** Paul concludes this chapter with a series of questions all begging for a "no" answer. No one has all the gifts; we need each other. That's our goal here at Victory of the Lamb. We seek to build this body of Christ here in Franklin by utilizing every gift that we have. Yes, we do want to get bigger, but remember bodybuilding isn't just about size. There should be no underdeveloped gifts. And no gift should be given more honor than another. Let's encourage each other and give everyone equal honor no matter what part of the body they are. And most importantly, let's honor Christ. After all, it is his body and he is the whole reason we belong here.

Amen.