

Good evening. Welcome back to our time of study for this week. We are continuing on in our study of the nature and practice of the Church. Up to this point, we have looked at the Majesty of the Church, the Master of the Church, and the Mystery of the Church. You may have detected an ever so subtle pattern developing in the titles of this series of messages... they are alliterative, all starting with the letter “M”. While this is often helpful as an aid in remembering the content of a series of study, I will confess that it sometimes can result in a kind of “shoehorning” a study topic into a word beginning with “M”. So far I think I am doing ok, but I ask your indulgence if I concoct a title that makes you want to groan...and say, “Bob, how could you?!”

Before we get into tonight’s study, I would also ask for your indulgence as I request a favor. I believe that all of the platforms through which you might be watching these videos have a place where you can leave comments. It would be personally helpful to me if you could provide some feedback on these lessons...whether you are finding them edifying and helpful in drawing your hearts toward God and His Word...whether they are too long or too short...whether they are readily understood or whether you struggle to figure out what it is I am trying to say. Also, feel free to comment on the content of the message and share your thoughts.

So...onto tonight’s study. In God’s Word, we find a number of pictures...of metaphors...that describe the Church and the relationship between the Church and its Master, Jesus. This evening we are going start to explore those metaphors and see what God has revealed to us there about His nature and character, the character and nature of His Church, and the nature of the relationship between them. The major metaphors that we will be looking at through the course of our study are those of the body and head, sheep and shepherd, vine and branches, bride and bridegroom, and building and builder/cornerstone.

The metaphor that we see most often and in most detail in scripture is the metaphor of the Church as Christ’s body and Jesus as its Head. And the most extensive passage dealing with that metaphor is found in 1 Cor 12. When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthian Church, it was to address a host of misconceptions and misbehaviors. The church had broken up into factions, each claiming allegiance to a variety of “Christian leaders”. There was ongoing infighting and jockeying for positions of power and influence. They were suing one another and compromising their witness before a watching world. They were prideful, and dismissive of people they considered less enlightened or less spiritual...even to the point of being dismissive of Paul as unworthy and uncouth...a man of little prestige and presence. They were prideful about their tolerance of sin, extolling it, somehow, as upholding grace...to the point that they bragged about their tolerance of an incestuous relationship in the church, thinking it made them more enlightened and virtuous!

One of the many things Paul had to address in his letter in order to try to counter their rampant pride and sinful behavior was to remind them about the nature of their fellowship...to refresh and reinforce their understanding of the nature of the Church, the Body of Christ. In 1 Cor 12:12ff he writes,

“For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. 16 And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those *members* of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become

much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need *of it*. But God has *so* composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but *that* the members may have the same care for one another.”

So, what do we learn about the nature and operation of the Church from Paul’s words? First and foremost, we see that that we are established in unity. We are baptized by one Spirit into one body. There are no dividing lines...no worldly distinctions. We saw this clearly last week when we looked at the Mystery of the Church...that, according to Gal 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And, beloved, please understand that this is not some “spiritual, “someday bye and bye” unity...some theological construct...it is a practical day-to-day unity that finds expression in the “here and now”. It is a unity that allows us to bear one another’s burdens...to give sacrificially to our brothers and sisters to alleviate their need. It is a unity that allows us to risk ourselves, forgiving, and asking forgiveness of, our fellow members. It is a unity that leads to Paul’s expression of love for, and identification with, the Corinthian church where he writes, “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” And it is a unity that we see concretely expressed in the practice of the fledgling church.

In Acts 2:42ff we read, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

They were spending time with each other, taking meals together, talking about what God has done and is doing. They were hungry for teaching and thankful in prayer. They were marveling at the miracles displayed through the apostles. And they were deeply conscious of, and deeply concerned about, the physical and spiritual needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ. But beloved, we need to do a reality check at this point. It is lovely to think about participating in life with each other in this way...with this degree of commitment, communion, and fellowship. But we need to realize that it comes at a profound cost...it comes at the cost of “self interest” and pride. This degree of intimacy and fellowship cannot happen unless “we regard one another as more important than ourselves”. Before there is a breakdown of unity, there is always a breakdown of love! Isn’t that what we saw in the behavior of the Corinthian church just a few moments ago?

In Phil 2:2ff. we read, “make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

To the degree that this attitude does not permeate our life... in our relationships with both God and man... that is the degree to which we will not manifest the love and unity of Christ.

So, the first thing we discover in this metaphor is our unity...the second is our necessity. There is no such thing as an “unnecessary” member of the body of Christ...we all have value and purpose in the functioning and the building up of the Church. Each member of the body has a unique “placement” in the body in accordance with God’s desire. While it is true that God will accomplish His will and purpose without us if necessary, He has gifted us and placed us in His Body as He desires so that we can put those gifts into action for the benefit and edification of the Church.

In Rom 12:4ff we read, “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”

We can, all too often, reject or ignore this responsibility. We can easily fall into a mindset where we come together for what we can get rather than for what we can give. Life can feel too full...too demanding...to add to it the care and support of our brothers and sisters. But, beloved, we cannot wait until the exercise of life together becomes easy... that will never happen. While there is great joy to be found in sharing of our lives together, there is great sorrow and hardship to be found there as well, for we are all hard to love. To deny this would be disingenuous at best, and deceitful at worst. This “hard” truth is abundantly reflected in the lives of the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament apostles, and the very life of our Lord, Jesus. Did Jeremiah have an easy task calling his brethren to repentance and being mocked and rejected by those he was sent to serve? Did Paul have an easy task ministering “night and day with tears” during his years at Ephesus? Did our Lord have an easy time walking to the cross and hearing “Crucify Him” from those whom He loved? But this “body life” is part of our fundamental call to “follow Him”...we ignore it at our, and our church’s, peril.

So...first, unity... second, necessity... a third thing we discover is our diversity. The Body is composed of eyes, and ears, and hands, and feet...members in differing roles we can erroneously deem more honorable or less honorable...more valuable or less valuable. In fact, Paul exhorts us to be careful to give more recognition to those in positions of “lower” regard to ensure that they understand their value to the Body. God, speaking through Paul, illustrates the obvious foolishness of our thinking that some members are unnecessary. He says, “If they were all one member, where would the body be?” If everyone is an eye, you just have a giant eye. If everyone is an ear, you just have a giant ear. What a ridiculous picture! But a body, composed of many parts working diligently together under the direction of its Head...that is anything but ridiculous. It is, instead, a presentation of great beauty and power as it paints a picture of Christ displayed before a world willfully ignorant of His majesty.

Beloved, a failure to understand and appreciate the nature of the Body...the nature of the Church...leads to a host of sinful and destructive behaviors and thinking. It leads to a lack of care for each other, and a dismissive attitude toward those deemed “weaker” and unnecessary. It leads to factions and clichés...”I am of Apollos”...”I am of Paul”. It leads to necessary members of the body failing to fulfill their functions and exercise their gifts because they think they are unimportant or of little value. It leads to a warped view of God and of His redemptive work. And it leads to a low view of the Father’s love and care for His children.

But when we come to understand and value the nature of, and our responsibility for, the Body in which we have been placed... then we start seeing ourselves and each other from God’s perspective. We can always, with our own warped and unclear vision, choose to find someone that we can see as inferior, of low regard, and unworthy of our time and attention. But when we see through His eyes, we see each other as he does...as His children, precious in His sight... washed by His blood...destined for His glory. Let that be our prayer this evening...that we have our Father’s eyes.

Let us pray.