

**Sermon Series:** Corinthian Collisions (When Relationships Collide)

**To be used with:** Session Six: The Big Picture

**Sermon Title Possibilities:**

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**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 12

**Connection to Unit Theme:** The small group study “When Relationships Collide” covers several different character vignettes from throughout the Old and New Testament to show positive ways of dealing with conflict. This sermon series focuses on one church to teach on the same principles. The church in Corinth was arguably the most dysfunctional church of all time (if you wanted to be *really* bold, you could title this series, “You Think *We’ve* Got Problems?”). Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul is the voice of the impassioned church planter, patiently (for the most part) addressing the specific conflicts that were dividing this young church.

The small group session this week is called “The Big Picture.” The main point is, “God is at work even in the midst of conflict.” For the sermon, I would suggest applying the idea of “The Big Picture” to Paul’s teaching on spiritual gifts. Paul devotes three entire chapters—nearly 20 per cent of the letter—to helping the young church understand what spiritual gifts are all about. In 1 Corinthians 12, he uses the extended metaphor of the human body to illustrate that every gift from every member is important to “the big picture” of what Christ wants to do with His body.

**Introduction:** The 2012 movie *The Avengers* was the story of a group of superheroes that banded together to battle an evil force that was bent on world domination. The only problem was, these superheroes had a hard time banding. For about the first half of the movie, they were each caught up in their own agendas. They squabbled. They backbit. They distrusted each other’s motives. As a result, the whole was actually far less than the sum of its parts. And the bad guy was smart enough to anticipate all of this. He actually counted on their lack of unity in order to accomplish his diabolical plan. He almost won, because the Avengers failed to realize that it took all of them, each using his or her own gifts, in order to defeat the enemy.

At one point, when it looks as though the team has fallen apart, Agent Nick Fury says to them,

The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could.

The funny thing is, with the exception of that “fight the battles we never could” part, that pretty much could describe God’s plan for His church. And, unfortunately, the first half of *The Avengers* pretty much describes the way it often works out for churches. It certainly describes the way the church was functioning (or dysfunctioning) in Corinth. So in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul gives a “Nick Fury” speech of his own.

### 1. If it doesn’t point to Jesus, it’s not a gift (1 Cor. 12:1-3)

- Don’t miss Paul’s emphasis on unity from the outset: “Now about spiritual gifts, *brothers...*” (v. 1). Everything that follows is a teaching intended for members of the same family.
- In Corinth, “who’s got the best gifts” or “who’s got the most gifts” had apparently divided the congregation. The emphasis on love in chapter 13 and on the superiority of prophecy over

tongues in chapter 14 suggests that spiritual gifts had become points of pride for the Corinthians. There's no place for personal pride in the body of Christ.

- According to Bertolini and Richards, ecstatic utterances (similar to speaking in tongues) had also been a part of the pagan religious background many of the Corinthian believers were coming out of. They would work themselves into a religious frenzy and be “carried away” or “led astray” in their worship of mute idols (v. 2). [Smart Guide, p. 166]
- So Paul drew a line in the sand: if a believer said something blasphemous against Jesus in the midst of an ecstatic utterance, it wasn't a spiritual gift. Spiritual gifts exalt the Giver of the gift (Christ) and not the receiver of the gift (us).

*Application:* Pratt, in the HNTC, cuts to the chase: “If a religious experience does not honor Christ as Lord, then it is not from the Spirit.” (Pratt, 213). Every time a singer sings or a preacher preaches or a musician plays in our church, we have to evaluate the performance (can you even call it that?) on this criteria.

## **2. If it doesn't benefit the body, it's not a gift (1 Cor. 12:7-11)**

- Verse 7 tells us the purpose of spiritual gifts: they are manifestations of the Spirit for the *common good*. What is the common good? 1 Peter 4:10-11 says that each of us should use whatever gift we have received in order to serve others.
- Later, in 1 Cor. 14:3-4, Paul will say that those who prophesy “speak to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort;” and that he who prophesies “edifies the church.”
- Besides strengthening, encouraging, and comforting the body, spiritual gifts, properly used, *grow* the body. Flip over to 1 Corinthians 14:24 and notice what happens when an unbeliever comes into a worship service:

But if all are prophesying and some unbeliever or uninformed person comes in, he is convicted by all and is judged by all. The secrets of his heart will be revealed, and as a result he will fall facedown and worship God, proclaiming, “God is really among you.”

Emphasize that “prophecy” in this context doesn't mean “foretelling” the future, but “forthtelling” the word of God. Prophecy is “the God given ability to proclaim biblical truth in a way that brings people to a place of repentance” (Smart Guide, p. 169).

- Bertolini and Edwards point out that of all the places in Scripture where spiritual gifts are listed (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 4:10-11), there are different gifts listed in each one. There isn't a comprehensive list anywhere. There are even differences between 1 Cor. 12:4-11 and 28-30. Their conclusion:

It seems to me that the only plausible interpretation is that God never intended for us to get too hung up on identifying our own particular gifts. Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 12-14 did Paul encourage his readers to identify their gifts. Instead, he emphasized that as the people walked in the fullness of the Spirit they would automatically... exercise their gifts to the benefit of others (168)

- In chapter 14, Paul minimizes the benefit of speaking in tongues. This doesn't mean there isn't any value to this gift, but apparently so much emphasis was given to it in Corinth that Paul felt the need to put it in perspective.

*Application:* Whether you know what your gift(s) is/are or not, what matters is that as we continue to walk in the Spirit, He will give us opportunities to work to benefit others, both inside and outside the church. And you will start to notice that certain kinds of opportunities seem to come your way more frequently. They come easier to you. They feel like more of a natural fit. In other words, spiritual gifts inventories don't help you discover something about yourself you were clueless about. They really just confirm what you already knew, you just didn't know the name for it.

### 3. **If the body isn't coordinated, it isn't effective (1 Cor. 12:13-26)**

- The body of Christ in Corinth was as diverse in its composition (Jews, Greeks, slave, free) as it was in its giftedness (v. 13)
- Paul emphasized what brings the body together: we are baptized into one Spirit, and sustained by one Spirit (v. 13)
- The image isn't of every part of the body doing the same thing (v. 17-19), but every part of the body contributing to the same purpose. In a symphony, everyone plays different instruments, but they are all playing the same piece.
- *[Possible illustration: this might work for your group, or it might not.]* Although the Beatles are arguably the most influential rock and roll band in history, their career really only spanned about eight years (1962-1970). In 1970, the conflicts between them became too much for any of them to put up with any longer, and they broke up. Have you ever noticed how similar they were in their gifts? All four of them sang. All of them wrote songs. Three out of four of them played guitar. As talented as they were, there wasn't a lot of diversity between them. Compare them to U2. No one has ever sung on a U2 record except for Bono. No one has played lead guitar except the Edge. Is it a coincidence that U2 has had a career that is now in its fourth decade?
- *[Another Illustration]:* There are several diseases, such as muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, and cerebral palsy that attack the central nervous system and affect the body's ability to communicate with itself. The brain knows what it wants to do, but can't make the body respond. The mouth knows what it wants to say, but can't make the tongue cooperate. Every step is a struggle because the body has lost its coordination. As a result, the body loses its capacity to function the way it is supposed to.

### **Conclusion: Back to the Avengers**

If you've not seen The Avengers, then I don't want to spoil anything for you. But I will tell you that what finally brought this group of dysfunctional heroes together was the death of one of the characters. Somebody gave his life for the sake of the group, and this is what brought them together.

At the end of the day, the one thing makes a church more than just a bunch of talented people is the death and resurrection of Christ. Everything we do points to the sacrifice Christ made for us, and the reality of His resurrection. Without that, we could still be a group of talented people. But because of the resurrection, and the power of Christ that works within us, we are gifted people, brought together into one body, for one purpose.

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