

LESSON 2

Genuine Care for One Another

What makes care real?

That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

—1 Corinthians 12:25-26

Introduction

Last week the class began where the New Testament begins its "one another" commands: with how the church sees the church. Paul told the Corinthians that from now on Christians regard no one according to the flesh. This week the question moves one step further in. Once we have begun to see each other the way Christ sees us, what does it mean to care for each other? Not in general. Specifically. What does care look like when it is real, and how do we tell the difference between care and its imitations?

Paul answers inside a body metaphor that has become so familiar the force of it can be dulled. He has been arguing through 1 Corinthians 12 that the church is one body with many members. Different gifts, different functions, different visible places within the congregation. But one body. And a body does not merely contain its members. A body feels for its members. When one part suffers, every part suffers. When one part is honored, every part rejoices. That is how a body works. That is what Paul wants the church to look like.

A Body, Not an Audience

The Corinthian church was fractured. The letter opens with divisions of personality (1 Corinthians 1:10-12), moves through divisions of morality (1 Corinthians 5), divisions of judgment (1 Corinthians 6), and divisions at the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11). By the time Paul reaches chapter 12, he has spent eleven chapters naming the ways this church has cracked along every line a congregation can crack along. Then he gives them the body:

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. 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. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

One body. Every baptized believer in Corinth, slave and free, Jew and Greek, educated and uneducated, wealthy and poor, all baptized into the same body by the same Spirit. Paul is not offering a metaphor to make the church feel warm. He is giving them the theological reason their fractures cannot stand. The body cannot be at war with itself and remain healthy.

Ten verses later, Paul names the purpose of the body's arrangement:

That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:25)

The body is designed so its members care for one another. This is not a nice feature. It is the purpose. A church that does not care for its own has failed at the level of purpose, not at the level of style.

The Same Care

The Greek word Paul uses is a form of *merimna*, a word that elsewhere gets translated *worry* or *anxious concern*. Jesus uses it when he tells the disciples not to be anxious about what they will eat (Matthew 6:25). Paul uses it of his own daily burden for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28). The care Paul wants Christians to have for one another is the kind of care that sits awake at night. It is the care of someone who is invested, not someone who is polite.

Three things about this care are worth slowing down to see.

First, it is *the same* care for one another. Not the kind of care that picks favorites inside the body, ramping up for those who are easy to love and ramping down for those who are not. The body does not favor its parts. A hand does not care about the foot only when convenient. The same care runs through every member of the church because the same Spirit runs through every member of the church.

Second, it is care for *one another*. The direction matters. Care in the church does not flow only from leaders toward members, or from strong toward weak, or from seasoned Christians toward newer ones. It runs every direction. Every member is a giver. Every member is a receiver.

Third, Paul names the purpose at the start of the verse: *that there may be no division in the body*. Real care is the antidote to division. The churches that fracture are not the ones that care too much. They are the ones whose care has thinned out until members are functionally strangers. Where care is genuine, division struggles to take hold.

Love Without Hypocrisy

Paul uses another word for this kind of care in Romans 12. The passage is worth reading together because it sits right next to another "one another" command:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:9-10)

The word Paul uses for *genuine* is *anupokritos*. It is the word that gives us *hypocrite* with a negative prefix. Literally, "unhypocritical." A hypocrite in the ancient world was an actor, someone wearing a mask and speaking someone else's lines on a stage. Love that is *anupokritos* is love with no mask. No performance. No rehearsed lines. It is love that means what it says and does what it promises.

Here is where this lesson lands its first concrete question. The early church was not a perfect community, but what Paul calls for is a community where love is not an act. Where the smile at the door

is matched by a presence later in the week. Where the promise to pray is actually followed by prayer. Where the offer of help is not a polite formula but a genuine invitation to be interrupted.

The easiest kind of care to produce is care that costs nothing. A word here. A nod there. A sympathetic face when the news is hard. None of these things are wrong. But Paul is describing something deeper than social reflex. He is describing a community whose members are actually tied to each other, so that the pain of one registers on the others and the joy of one lifts the others.

Suffering Together, Rejoicing Together

Paul gives two tests for this. Both are in verse 26:

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

The first test is the easier one to understand, though not the easier one to live. When a member of the church is suffering, does the suffering register across the body? Does the news that a family is walking through a loss actually reach the rest of the church? And once it reaches them, does it change what they do with their week? Paul writes elsewhere, "Weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). Their tears become the church's tears.

This is not only a matter of knowing. It is a matter of feeling, and then of acting on what is felt. In a healthy body, a wound anywhere produces a response everywhere. Hands move to protect. The brain tracks the injury. Other parts of the body adjust to compensate. A congregation that has the same care for one another moves the same way when one of its own is wounded.

The second test is the one that sneaks up on a church. When one member is honored, does the rest of the body rejoice? Or does it envy? Paul does not assume Christians will automatically celebrate one another's good news. He knows the human heart. Envy is quieter than open division, but it does the same damage over time. The church where members cannot rejoice at another's honor is not a healthy body. It is a body whose parts have begun to compete against each other.

What makes rejoicing genuinely mutual? The same thing that makes suffering mutual: the recognition that the other member is actually *mine*, and that his joy is not a threat to me. A hand does not resent the foot for walking. The body is not arranged for competition. It is arranged for shared life.

Presence, Not Performance

What does genuine care look like on the ground? Paul is not producing a list of techniques, and neither is this lesson. But the contrast Paul sets up gives the church a working test.

Performed care looks good from the outside. It shows up at the moments when showing up will be noticed. It uses the right words, sometimes with precision. It produces reports that can be pointed to later.

Genuine care looks like presence. It shows up because someone needs it, not because it will be counted. It uses fewer words and more time. It does not leave a paper trail, and it does not need to, because the body is keeping the record in a way Paul would say matters more.

The early church had a reputation in the ancient world for this. When plague swept through cities and pagans fled, Christians stayed behind and nursed the dying, including people who were not part of the church. When believers were imprisoned for the faith, other believers went to the prisons at great risk to feed them, visit them, and speak the gospel alongside them (Hebrews 10:32-34). When famine struck Judea, churches hundreds of miles away took up collections and sent representatives with the money. These were not programmatic gestures. They were the reflexes of a body that felt its own pain and could not do otherwise.

A congregation that wants to grow into that kind of care does not begin with a program. It begins by noticing who is actually in the room and what they actually need. Genuine care starts with attention.

Looking to Jesus

Before the lesson closes, look at the one whose care sets the pattern. Jesus is the perfect member of the body, the head who fully inhabits the love he asks of his church.

When Lazarus died, Jesus came to the tomb knowing he was going to raise him. The outcome was already decided. Yet John records:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. (John 11:33-35)

Jesus wept at the funeral of a man he was about to restore. The tears were not staged for effect. The God who became flesh entered the grief of Mary and Martha fully, on their terms, before he changed it. That is care without a mask. The head of the body feels what the body feels.

The same Jesus rejoiced with the seventy-two when they returned from their mission reporting that even demons submitted to his name. Luke writes, "In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (Luke 10:21). The joy of his disciples became his own joy, not as a polite acknowledgment but as a shared delight in the Father's work.

Paul will later tell the Philippians, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). That mind is the mind that wept at the tomb and rejoiced at the ministry report. That is the care the body is called to share. The members take their cues from the head. What Jesus did, the church learns to do in smaller measure and with his strength.

A Final Encouraging Word

As you think about your local congregation, perhaps you see this care is already alive. It is not always loud. It is not always visible to everyone. But it is there in the meals that arrive after a surgery, in the texts that show up on a hard day, in the quiet phone calls that no one outside the circle knows about. The body is working. The Spirit is doing what the Spirit has always done in the church.

The question for a class like this one is not whether the care is real. The question is whether it can grow. Paul writes to the Thessalonians who were already loving one another well, and tells them to "do so

more and more" (1 Thessalonians 4:10). That is the Christian pattern for every virtue worth having. Wherever the care is real, there is room for it to be deeper, wider, and steadier than it is now.

The good news under all of this is that Christians are not trying to manufacture care out of their own resources. The same Spirit who baptized the church into one body is the Spirit who produces the fruit of the Spirit, and the first-named fruit is love (Galatians 5:22). Genuine care is not finally an achievement. It is the Spirit at work in people who have given him room. The call this week is to give him that room.

What the world needs to see — what a watching neighbor, a watching coworker, a watching child actually needs to see — is a church whose members have the same care for one another. Not a perfect church. A real one. A body where no one is invisible, no one is expendable, and no one carries his load alone. That is what Paul was after in Corinth. That is what Christ is after here.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul uses the image of a body to describe the church. What happens in a physical body when one part refuses to feel what another part feels? How does that picture apply to a congregation?

2. The Greek word for "genuine" in Romans 12:9 literally means "without a mask." Where in Christian life is the temptation to wear a mask strongest? Why?

3. Paul names two tests of real care in 1 Corinthians 12:26, suffering together and rejoicing together. Which is harder, and why?

4. The early church had a reputation in the ancient world for extraordinary care. What reputation does the church in our part of the world have today? If it is thinner, what has thinned it?

