

September 7th, 2025 Sermon

Scripture Intro: Trading independence for interdependence

Living with an almost two-year-old, some of the words I hear most often are "no, my do it!" There's an innate desire within each of us to be our own person - to have the satisfaction of doing something ourselves and the pride of a job well done. It's healthy to want to contribute and know that we're useful or needed.

But we also hear "help, please", usually after independence has crashed into reality. For some reason, though, those words get harder to say as we get older. We start believing we really can do it on our own.

That's the myth of independence at work. Most of us have this problem: we end up placing our hope in health, money, success, or politics instead of asking for help. These things might work for a while, but they take more than they give - like living on coffee instead of sleep.

The church in Corinth struggled with this too. In their social-climbing, success-driven city, they'd heard about spiritual gifts and wondered what they could gain from them. But Paul had to remind them - and us - that God doesn't give gifts so we can go our own way. He gives them so we can build each other up.

Today Paul shows us what it really means to trade independence for interdependence by explaining that we are Christ's body, and we need every part.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-31

Now concerning spiritual gifts: brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be unaware. ² You know that when you were pagans, you used to be enticed and led astray by mute idols.

³ Therefore I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are different activities, but the same God works all of them in each person. ⁷ A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good: ⁸ to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, ⁹ to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of tongues, to another, interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body is not one part but many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I’m not a hand, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I’m not an eye, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted. ¹⁹ And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” Or again, the head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable. ²³ And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, ²⁴ which our respectable parts do not need.

Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, ²⁵ so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. ²⁶ So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, next miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, leading, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all do miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But desire the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way.

Sermon: I don’t need you!

A while back I was on some weak scaffolding that fell and took me with it. Miraculously, most of my body wasn't hurt at all. But my wrist, in the doctor's words, was "completely shattered."

For quite a while the rest of my body needed to help out quite a bit. Simple things like getting dressed, and eating were suddenly much harder. I had to rely on new ways of doing things, and new people to do them in a way that felt pretty uncomfortable as my body healed.

I don't even think about it most days now, but I can tell you, there were a couple months where there wasn't a moment that I forgot. It woke me up at night, and changed how I lived, worked, spent my money, prayed, and saw other people.

When Paul says that the church is Christ's body, it's more than a metaphor; it's a vivid reminder of just how completely Jesus makes us a part of his family. If we who believe in Jesus really are his body, and that he really does live in us through his Spirit, then that has a dramatic impact on how we understand ourselves.

As Paul points out, it's ridiculous for a hand to decide it's going to strike out on its own. An ear can't say to an eye, "I don't need you." But I don't have to tell you that churches don't always act like that. We often find it quite easy to tell someone else that we don't need them. Or go our own way because we get offended or frustrated by others.

As followers of Jesus, we can act more like we're part of a club than a body. We pay our membership fees, we show up once a week, and we don't want to be asked to do more than that. We speak more about where we "go" to church than where we are the church. It's easier in many ways because we can just opt in or opt out. We don't have to give ourselves to the church, because it's something we do, not who we are.

But then we wonder why our experience of the Christian life, or of the church doesn't seem to measure up to what we've read and heard about. It feels a bit hollow and unfulfilling, like there must be more to following Jesus than this.

And thank God, there is! Paul knows that unless we exercise our faith, it will become weak. But when we join with Jesus in what he is doing, we become more passionate and inspired by him. We begin to understand our part to play, serving wholeheartedly, while having the humility to see where our gifts end and others begin.

Part of this involves learning to ask for help. It's what allows us to take rest from the poisonous lie that we must do it all on our own, or that we have nothing to offer. The antidote to both independence and dependence is interdependence. Interdependence is when we recognise that we are a body, and that we each have our part to play. We are completely one, but we are not the same. There is unity in our diversity. I need you, and you need me, and we both rely on the Spirit of God.

Paul points out at the beginning of our reading that all Christians have the Spirit. The desire to follow Jesus is proof of the spirit, however feeble that desire may feel. Because we don't want to follow Jesus on our own. We can say the words, but the desire to recognise and live out the truth that Jesus is Lord can only come through the Spirit's work.

God is at work in us. This isn't just true for some super-Christians, or for those long down the road of faith, it is true for you (and you, and you) and me, and every one of us. God has made us uniquely to serve and be served by each other, in specific ways.

To put it simply, we all have spiritual gifts. But maybe even those words seem strange. What it means most simply is that we all have roles and abilities given to us by God that are not simply our own talents. They are a gift empowered by God, and we each have not just one, but a grouping of these gifts. They will be called out in different ways at different times, because they are for the body. Some gifts will be more necessary at one stage of our lives or another, but all have their place. Every person here isn't just helpful, but necessary to the body.

So how do we get to a place where we really are interdependent? How do we figure out what our gifts are? A lot of us might feel like we probably don't have any gifts, never mind many. And maybe others of us feel like we have them all! It's important to have some sense of what our gifts are, or we end up in those traps of independence (thinking we need no one else) or dependence (thinking no one else needs us).

Tim Keller (who was a minister and author in New York for many years) suggests with others that there are three basic principles to discern spiritual gifts:

1. It is better to identify "clusters" of gifts, rather than just specific ones.
2. Look outward, not inward. See what needs move us toward other people.
3. Get feedback from others. We are empowered and sent out in community.

When we look at the various lists in the scripture of different spiritual gifts, it becomes clear that they represent types of gifts rather than being exhaustive lists. And in these lists are three basic categories of gifts.

The first cluster of gifts often help in evangelism and teaching. They are often bold, less "practically focussed" but very effective for communication of truth, like gifts of knowledge, tongues, teaching, or prophecy. This can look like teaching Sunday school, having a conversation about faith with the hairdresser, or chatting with a friend about what God has been doing in your life.

The second cluster of gifts help in "practical" ministry involved in coming alongside others, and ministry of helps, like the gifts of faith, healing, and mercy. Whether you're stopping to help someone with a flat tire on the road, or helping with a budget, or giving finances to support people in need: that's a gift.

The third cluster of gifts help in directing and serving group needs, like the gifts of administration, wisdom, and leadership. Perhaps you have an ability to bring people together, organise events, or give good counsel to churches or in business.

There can of course be quite a bit of overlap between them, but these clusters are helpful because the focus is not on us, or our talents or desires. They cause us to look outward instead of inward, seeing how God is partnering with us to serve his people in this time and

place. Spiritual gifts are the Holy Spirit showing up in our lives and are "given to each person for the common good." Our identity and value do not come from what we can do through these gifts, because they are not the point. Serving God and serving each other is the point: the gifts are a means to an end.

God gives us the gifts as a body, to serve the body, and so it is only natural that they are also empowered and recognised by the body. We will certainly have some ideas about what we may or may not be called to, but it is most often through others that the Spirit shows how he is gifting us. Otherwise, we end up trying to fill a need that isn't there, or forcing something because we want it, not because it is what God is doing.

But here's something crucial we need to understand: spiritual gifts are not the same as spiritual fruit. You can be incredibly talented, and effective in ministry, but not have the Spirit truly at work in your life. Natural abilities exist that are different from the Spirit's empowerment.

This is dangerous territory, because we sometimes elevate people based on what they achieve rather than who they are becoming in Christ. We forget that spiritual gifts are a means to an end - the end being love, service, and building up the body.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." This is what the Spirit is growing in every believer. These qualities don't pass away like gifts might. They're who God is making us to be.

That's why Paul moves directly to talking about love in 1 Corinthians 13. This is the famous "love chapter", and he says that we could speak in tongues, prophesy, move mountains with our faith, and give away everything we have, but if we don't have love, it's all meaningless. The evidence of God working in our lives isn't whether we have impressive spiritual gifts. The true evidence is how and why we use whatever gifts we have.

If all of our doing is about us, then we've missed the point entirely. Holding onto independence will rob us of the goodness of all that God has gifted us to be - like a hand that tries to cut itself off and then wonders why it can't move anymore.

We don't get to choose our gifts, because they are just that: gifts. We might not initially like the role we play. It might feel unimportant, or too important! But each member (or part) of the body is necessary. The lower intestine may not have the most glorious of jobs, but you can go longer without a hand than an intestine! As Paul points out, many of the roles that seem less desirable are indispensable.

We can't be a healthy church unless every person is joining in and fulfilling the role for which God has created for us, the Spirit enables us. When one of us suffers, we all suffer.

When one of us rejoices, we all rejoice. We can't ignore the joys and sorrows and gifts and needs of the person sitting in front or behind us, any more than we can stub our toe and not bend over to grab it with our hands and make some loud remark with our mouths! We're meant to be interdependent, not independent.

And that's why Paul comes back to the truth that not everyone has all the gifts. It's not a failure if we do not speak in tongues like someone else, or serve like them, or provide hospitality as they do. Even if we share a set of gifts, someone will always seem more gifted than we are, and that should make us rejoice, not despair. You don't stop using your legs just because other people are much faster than you, you make use of the gift you've been given.

As Jesus said so many times in the scriptures, the gifts that God has given to us are wonderful things, but they are wonderful when they are used as they were meant to be. When we see that God has made us to be interdependent, loving and relying on him and his people, then these gifts can flourish and grow. But if we try to make it about ourselves, or go off on our own, we cut ourselves off from the goodness of God, and we rob the other members of the body of the good gifts that God has given to us.

I remember as a kid that feeling of making it onto a team. The joy of being a part of something, and being included. You and I get to be a part of something so much bigger and more wonderful than we can imagine. Jesus has made us a part of much more than his team, he has made us a part of his very own body. So let's hold on to the goodness of God. Earnestly desiring to explore and grow in the wonderful gifts and roles that he has given us. Serving one another in love, just as Jesus has done for us.

Some of you need to know that you are not an extra, or an add-on. You are a necessary part of the body of Christ. And others need to be reminded that the world is not all on your shoulders. You are necessary, but you are a part, not the whole.

If we try to be independent, and do it on our own, we'll keep wondering what on earth we're here for. We will wonder why the church seems weak and unfulfilling. But when we recognise that we are a part of something—of someone—much bigger than ourselves; that we were made not to be independent, but to be interdependent, we will begin to see how true it is that there is no limit to what God can do.

God has given good gifts that he intends for us to use. So, take some time this week. Pray and ask those who know you what gifts God has given, and don't leave it there: find a way to exercise the spiritual gifts God has given. There might be some stiffness or discomfort as we stretch ourselves, but we need you, and you need us. Because Jesus is at work in the world, and he is at work through you and me.