

“If one member suffers, all suffer together.”

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. This event is organized by a large number of organizations which are involved in ministry to Christians around the world who are being persecuted and the result is that many churches around the world participate by giving more than usual time to pray for fellow believers who are suffering at the hands of others simply because they are followers of Jesus Christ. The organization with which we are most familiar is The Voice of the Martyrs and we will be having an offering for them during the worship service this evening. For the last number of years, we have participated in this International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church by devoting a worship service to this subject and encouraging all of us to remember the persecuted church in our prayers and in other ways.

It's good, I think to be reminded of our responsibilities to our persecuted brothers and sisters through an event such as this. There are many things on our minds. There are many things to which we legitimately give our attention. And it is easy for other important concerns to be pushed down the list of things that we should be thinking about and praying about. So, it is good that once a year we give some focused time to the suffering of our fellow believers around the world so that we are reminded of their plight and so that we can strengthen our resolve to give them more attention than many of us tend to do.

Here are just a few recent stats and facts from Open Doors which is a ministry to persecuted Christians: “Persecution rose globally again for the third year in a row, indicating how volatile the situation has become.... Countries in South and Southeast Asia rapidly rose to unprecedented levels and now rank among such violent areas as the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.... Approximately 215 million

Christians experience high, very high, or extreme persecution. North Korea remains the most dangerous place to be a Christian (for 14 straight years) Islamic extremism remains the global dominant driver of persecution, responsible for initiating oppression and conflict in 35 out of the 50 countries on the 2017 list.... [Open Doors List of the 50 worst countries for persecution]. Open Doors defines persecution as “any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ. Christians remain one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world. Christians throughout the world continue to risk imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, beheadings, rape and even death as a result of their faith.”

What we will do this morning is consider what Paul teaches us about the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 with a special focus on the first part of verse 26 which says, “If one member suffers, all suffer together....” These words are based on the fact that all believers in Christ everywhere are members of the one body of Christ. This is a very important part of the biblical teaching about the church of Jesus Christ. There are many implications that flow from this teaching. We will focus particularly on this principle that “If one member suffers, all suffer together.”

The body of Christ is a very profound reality. Jesus Christ and all who believe in him are one body. This is obviously imagery. Paul is using the idea of a human body to tell us something important about the relationship of believers to Jesus Christ as well as the relationship of believers to one another. But while this is imagery, it is not only imagery. There is a reality that is being expressed. It is not just that Jesus and his people are like a body; we are a body. It is a spiritual body, but it is no less real because it is spiritual. God is a spirit and he is the most real entity that exists.

So, the body of Christ is a real thing. Christ and his people are one in a very real deep and spiritual way. And the Bible speaks of it as real. Listen to how Paul speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, ¹²“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. ¹³For 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."

You see our salvation depends on the fact that Christ and his people are one body. Romans 6, for instance, teaches that we were united to Christ in his death and in his resurrection. That was and is a real spiritual union so that when Christ died we died to sin and when Christ arose we arose to new life in Christ. Because we are one with Christ, our sin is his and his righteousness is ours. Because we are one with Christ, his life is our life. This is not imaginary. It is real – even though the imagery of a human body helps us to understand the various implications of this profound truth.

One of the implications is that each part of the body is important, and each part contributes to the functioning of the whole. That is what Paul deals with in verses 14-24 of 1 Corinthians 12. Paul writes that the body has many members. He is speaking about parts. Our bodies are a unity and, yet we have hands and feet and eyes and so on. Paul says that this is also true with the body of Christ. It is one body and, yet it is made up of many parts. Each believer is a part of the whole. Each believer is compared to a body part. And Paul made a big deal of the fact that every body-part is necessary for the proper functioning of the whole. Paul goes out of his way to stress that the parts of the body that seem weaker or unrepresentable are essential for the proper functioning of the body.

Then he comes to the principle that we will focus on this morning. The idea actually begins in verse 25 and continues in verse 26 – “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....” This is clearly our experience as far as our physical bodies are concerned. If you burn your finger on a hot pan, you don’t think, “Only my finger is hurting and the rest of me is fine.” In one sense that is true, but in the sense of what you are experiencing, your whole body is hurting. And the rest of the body turns on the tap and places the burnt finger under cold water. Your finger is a part of the body, but when it is in pain the whole body is affected. You feel the pain. And this, according

to Paul, is what happens in the body of Christ. "If one member suffers, all suffer together...."

Notice that Paul here states this as a fact. This is not an exhortation. Paul here is not saying that if one member suffers all the other members should suffer. He is stating a fact. "If one member suffers, all suffer together...." It is objectively true that "if one member suffers, all suffer together...." That does not mean that every member feels the same pain, but it does mean that the body as a whole is hurting. The whole body is affected. That belongs to the nature of being a body. If one part of the body is suffering, the whole body is suffering. Certainly, the head of the body, Jesus Christ, is affected. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus sympathizes with us. The word "sympathize" means to suffer with. When God's people suffer, Jesus suffers with them. He enters into their suffering. He is affected by it.

And that is the case with the rest of the body as well. We are being transformed into the image of Christ. Part of what it means to be saved is that we are being gradually changed to become more like Christ. That being the case we will enter into the sufferings of our fellow believers just as he does. If we don't, we are not like Christ. If we don't we are not part of the body. Paul is saying here that because Christ and his people are one body, when "one member suffers, all suffer together."

But there are degrees of sympathizing with the suffering of our fellow believers and the implication here is that we should grow in the degree that we suffer along with others in the body who are suffering. And sometimes Paul does put this idea as an exhortation. For instance, in Romans 12:15 Paul exhorts us, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." This is something that will happen automatically because of the nature of the body. But it is also something that we need to be urged to do.

So, this is something that we do automatically because of the nature of belonging to the body. And yet we are exhorted to do it more and more deeply. We see this same relationship between what happens automatically and exhortations in holiness and obedience in general for God's people. If we belong to Jesus Christ, we will fight against sin and pursue holiness and obedience. There is a sense in which this happens

automatically because believers are dead to sin and alive to God. If it is not happening, then we are not really saved. Everyone who is saved will be turning from sin and growing in obedience. It cannot be otherwise. And yet that does not mean that there is no place for commands and exhortations. The Bible has lots of commands and exhortations to believers. Obedience is automatic in the sense that it always follows from true faith. It is not automatic in the sense that it just happens without any effort on our part.

And so it is here, when it comes to this principle of the whole body suffering when one part suffers. In one sense it is automatic because that is what it means to be a body. And yet we are also exhorted to weep with those who weep.

Now there is a closely related point that comes from the idea that the body of Christ is one body. The language that we tend to use when we speak about our brothers and sisters who are persecuted can be misleading. We tend to refer to those who are being persecuted as the persecuted church. And then the rest of us are the free church or the church in the west. We kind of need to use this kind of terminology, but it can be misleading because it sets up a “them and us” mentality that obscures the fact that we are one body of Christ. I read of this in an article in *Christianity Today* which quotes Eddie Lyle – president of Open Doors UK and Ireland. Lyle says, “This is about family business. This is not a philanthropic interest, this is about a biblical imperative which says when one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts.”

Lyle’s point is that the terminology of persecuted church and free church obscures the unity of the body. It’s easy for us to think of ourselves as the ones who are truly blessed and to think of ourselves as helping people who need our charity. We are OK. They are needy, and so we must help those who are less fortunate than we are. Lyle is saying that that way of thinking does not do justice to the biblical teaching that we are one body. This is about family. This is about hurting because our brothers and sisters are hurting. When we give to a charity case, we can donate our money and be relatively unaffected by the suffering of the people we are trying to help. But in the case of persecuted Christians we are members of the same body and so it’s not us and them. It is us.

Their persecution is our persecution because we are one. Hebrews 13:3 expresses this idea when it says, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”

There is a huge difference between giving to some cause or even praying for some needy people somewhere far away and entering into their pain because we are all members of the same body. In the body when one member suffers the whole body feels the pain. When we think too much in terms of the persecuted church and the free church – when we think too much in terms of two churches, the danger is that we think of the persecuted church which is suffering and the church in the west which is not hurting. That is a denial of this truth of our text that when one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. Obviously, we have to make a distinction. Our experience is different from those who are suffering extreme persecution. Some believers are being persecuted in ways that we are not. And yet Eddie Lyle’s point is one that is worth pondering. Speaking about the persecuted church and the non-persecuted church can obscure the fact that there is only one church and we are all members of the same body.

Another point is that this principle that “if one member suffers, all suffer together” is not the same as the natural sympathy human beings have when they observe another person suffering. Of course, there is a heartless indifference that some people have for the suffering of others, but there are also many people who are very sympathetic of the suffering of others. There is a huge concern in our society about all kinds of suffering in the world. There are many unbelievers who are deeply troubled by the persecution of Christians. Sometimes they put us to shame.

What Paul is speaking about in our text when he says that when “one member suffers, all suffer together,” is something different than the sympathy and concern that many non-Christians have for suffering Christians. The care that Christians have and should have for other Christians may look the same from an external perspective, but there is a huge difference in terms of what is going on beneath the surface. Nice and caring non-Christian people are still worshipping themselves in one

way or another. They may truly care about suffering people. They may sacrifice much to care for them, but their hearts have not been changed so that they are not motivated by love for God and love for God's people because they are the people of God.

So what Paul is speaking about in our text is something quite different from a non-Christian showing care and concern for persecuted Christians. Externally it may even look similar, but for the Christian this is part of the outworking of the gospel in his life. The care and concern that Paul is speaking about here comes from a regenerated heart that is looking to Christ for forgiveness and that is motivated by the love that God has shown to him or her in Christ. Think of what John writes in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us."

The love of Christians for one another is not just a natural compassion, it is a love that is sparked and fueled by God's love for us in Christ. And so what Paul is talking about when he tells us, "If one member suffers, all suffer together" is a caring and a sympathy that belongs to the relationships that are the fruit of the gospel in our lives. We are motivated by God's love for us in Christ. The impulse to care comes from hearts that have been renewed by the Holy Spirit and that are seeking to please the Lord. The love for our fellow believers is not the same as a natural love between human beings. Love between believers is a love that is rooted in our common relationship with Christ so that we are brothers and sisters in the Lord. What Paul is speaking about here is not just natural sympathy, but supernatural gospel-generated love for Christ and our fellow members of the one body of Christ. This love and care is the fruit of salvation and flows from our relationship with God through Christ.

So, what does this look like in connection with our fellow-Christians who are being persecuted? It looks like suffering. "If one member suffers, all suffer together...." It means that we suffer because they are suffering. As human beings we have the ability to isolate ourselves from the suffering of others. Suffering is not enjoyable and so, we have a tendency to shield ourselves from it. We can do that by just not thinking about things that disturb us and thinking about more pleasant things. One of the things that this text is calling us to do is allow ourselves to

feel the pain that our brothers and sisters are feeling. It has to do with exposing ourselves to their stories and staying there long enough to enter into their pain. This is why Voice of the Martyrs and other organizations tell us the stories of what individual Christians or churches are going through. They could just give us a few stats and say, "Please give." But they go through great lengths to tell us their stories. The bare fact that 215 million Christians are being persecuted certainly is enough for some emotional impact, but reading the stories helps us to enter more deeply into the suffering of our fellow members of the body. We do this with people near at hand who are suffering. We ask them how they are doing, and we listen to their story and we feel something of what they are feeling. That is sympathy. That is showing that we care. Their suffering does not leave us unmoved.

It is not quite the same, with people we do not know personally and with whom we have no direct contact, but it is still possible to experience care and concern by taking the time to read their stories and reflect on those stories long enough to be impacted by what they are going through. That by itself is no help to our suffering brothers and sisters, but whether it helps or not, it is important that we care and that we are moved by what they are going through.

Then of course there is prayer. Prayer is not the last thing we can do because we are powerless to do anything else. Prayer is a tremendously significant way to support fellow believers who are being persecuted. God can do what we cannot do. And just because we do not often see the results of these kinds of prayers does not mean that they not significant. James 5:15 says that "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." This does not mean that our prayers will bring persecution to an end. The Bible makes it clear that persecution will be a real factor in the lives of God's people right to the end. But it may be the mean that God uses it to deliver some people from persecution. And besides that, persecuted believers need the power of God to help them to stand firm and to endure and to be faithful to God in their suffering. The literature tells us that what those who are suffering persecution most ask of us is that we pray for them and that we do not forget them.

And then there is the financial support. It is wonderful that there are people whom God has called to organize and to travel and to bring material aid to at least some of the people who are being persecuted. Financial gifts make that possible. This is not insignificant. This is a huge part of the way that God's people work together to accomplish significant things in service of God. We can't all travel around the world to directly help people who are suffering. We are all called to focus our lives on different things. The theology of the body teaches us that we can't all be eyes and we can't all be feet. Everyone serves in different ways. And one of the ways that makes this possible is for Christians who make money making it possible for other Christians to give themselves to working on the front lines. In that way we all work together to care for those who need our help. Giving in this way is not insignificant.

And perhaps there are some who feel that God is calling them to do more. There are opportunities. Go to the websites. Read the literature. There are ways of writing letters. There are volunteer positions. There will always be a need for some who go to the front lines and some who do the fund-raising and the awareness-raising and the organizing back home. Maybe God is calling some of us to get involved at a deeper level.

I know that many of us are diligent in prayer for the persecuted church and many of us do suffer with them and many of us do give financial support. That is one of the points of the text. "If one member suffers, all suffer together." This is first a fact and then an exhortation.

We are a church of Jesus Christ. We are not a perfect church – there is no such thing on earth. There is no area that we can examine and say that we are doing all that we should be doing. But we are a church of Jesus Christ. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And so, by the power of the gospel, we do care, and we do pray, and we do give. And we do this because of God's love for us and because of the love he has given us for him and for the body of Christ. God looks at us in Christ and because of that God is pleased with us and there is fruit in our lives.

But we need these reminders. We are busy with many things. We tend to forget and to become less diligent. As Paul puts it in Romans 7:17, we "have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out." So, we need reminders – gentle loving reminders. Reminders not only of

our duty, but also of the grace and love of God in Christ. It is the love of Christ that is the greatest motivation to give renewed effort where we have perhaps been less diligent than we should have been. So, let us confess our sins, rest in the forgiveness that Christ has earned for us and seek to grow in entering into the suffering of our persecuted brothers and sisters who with us belong to the same body of the same Christ.

Table Meditation

“If one member suffers, all suffer together.” Jesus Christ is the perfect example of this. For what is this but love. And Jesus showed his love supremely by giving his life on the cross for us. 1 John 3:16 says, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” It’s all about love and it begins with Christ’s love for us that he showed by giving his life for us.

And this is the focus of the Lord’s Supper. It is on the death of Christ on the cross that was motivated by love, the love of the Father and the love of Christ and the love of the Holy Spirit. When we hear about an aspect of our responsibility as Christians, as we have done this morning, it can make us feel guilty and it should. But the wonder of the gospel is that guilt does not have the last word. In the gospel, guilt is replaced by forgiveness and righteousness for those who believe. Guilt has its place. It is the truth and it is humbling, and it show us our need of Christ. But in the gospel guilt is taken away for those who repent and believe in Jesus. As members of the body of Christ, God looks at us as he looks at Christ. We share his righteousness. We are in him. We are one with him. And so, his death is our death and his resurrection is our resurrection.

And it is on that basis that we seek to become more loving and more caring. We love because he first loved us. It is his love the breaks the power of our selfishness and gives us the desire to be more like him. So, drink of the love of Christ expressed in the Lord’s Supper and seek to reflect that love in your lives more and more.

And let us celebrate our unity in Christ not only among ourselves, but with all believers everywhere. 1 Corinthians 10:17, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread.” That applies to our own congregation. But it also applies to the whole body, including our persecuted brothers and sisters. By taking part of in this celebration of the Lord’s Supper we do not only affirm our unity with the members of this congregation, but we affirm that we belong to the same body as those who are suffering because of their identification with Jesus Christ. And may the profundity of that unity inspire us to enter more fully into their suffering.