



But as it is, God arranged the members of the body each one of them as he chose.” — 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NRSV)



Adult Bible Study

Imagine a high-hurdler, tensed in the starting block before a race. The gun goes off, and simultaneously, her body propels forward. As she runs, you can see the years of training and discipline as she moves toward the first hurdle. Her body is an economy of motion. Nothing is wasted. She barely clears the hurdle, not really jumping, just easily stretching over it. It seems as if she defies gravity, as if her feet never touch the ground. Then the final sprint and forward lean, and the race is over before the echo of the starting pistol has left the stadium.

A well-trained athlete, whatever the sport, is a beautiful example of how, when everything works together, the result seems to be perfection. It is when the outcome looks as if it were simply meant to be.

Several times in his letters, Paul uses the example of an athlete to describe his life desires.

Read **1 Corinthians 9:24–27**.

1. To which two athletic events does Paul refer? What obvious contrast does Paul make between the athlete and the Christian?

As is the case with most analogies, this one falls short of describing the Christian life exactly. What phrase in verse 24 does not apply to the Christian?

2. What was Paul's purpose according to this passage? How could the discipline of the body affect his, and your, spiritual efforts?

Greek culture was well-known for its admiration of athletic achievement. The city of Corinth was no exception. In fact, it hosted a series of athletic contests that were second only to the Olympics in ancient times. For this reason, most of the members of the Corinthian church would be familiar with Paul's example. It would be like a writer today referring to the home-town professional sports franchise.

2 Timothy 4:6–8 might add further clarification to this example. Read this passage.

3. What additional information do Paul's words here provide? Who wins the “crown of righteousness?”

Paul's use of these examples might lead us to think that he was a strapping athlete, strong and physically fit. However, careful reading of his letters reveals quite the opposite.

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Read **2 Corinthians 12:6–10**.

4. What is the result of “Paul’s thorn”? How was Paul made strong in his weakness. How are we made strong in our weaknesses?

It is impossible to know exactly what Paul’s “thorn” was. However, we can be fairly certain that it was a physical disability and that it was at times debilitating. There are some additional hints in his letter to the Galatians.

Read **Galatians 4:12–14**.

Here Paul refers to a “bodily ailment” that caused him to remain among these congregations.

5. How did Paul describe this ailment? Have you ever faced a bodily ailment that held you back from something? What were Paul’s expectations because of this ailment? What were your expectations because of your ailment? Ironic and significant: Paul had a bodily ailment that, at times, slowed him down. Revisit v. #13. What could this mean?

Read **2 Corinthians 10:10**.

6. What further light might this shed on Paul’s disability?

Ironic and significant: Paul had a physical burden that went uncured and yet he is given the power through Christ to lift others burdens.

Paul was one of the greatest men of God that ever lived, but God chose to allow him to live with a disability that could have interfered with the work that he had been called to do. The passage in Galatians tells us that he was acutely aware of the effect that his appearance could have. However, Paul was able to embrace his disability and use it to teach others.

Read **1 Corinthians 12:12–26**.

7. How might Paul’s personal experience with disability have shaped what is written here? Paul had spent considerable time in Corinth (see Acts 18). How might the knowledge of Paul’s disability affect how Corinthians understood Paul’s Letters? Reopen your discussion on **2 Corinthians 12:6–10**. Does this passage add anything to your understanding of Paul’s view of weakness?

Return to the opening paragraph about the hurdler and apply Paul’s example of the Church as the human body. Think about how each body part is essential for the racer to perform at her peak. As you imagine her running the race, think about which parts of the body are visible and obviously contributing to her efforts. Then consider those parts which you cannot see.

8. Could the runner compete if his heart was not pumping blood to his muscles, or if his lungs were not replenishing the blood’s oxygen levels?

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Finding body parts that are not essential to the overall performance of this athlete would be difficult. Remember, success in the race is only a small part of the big picture.

Paul wanted the church at Corinth to understand that no one should feel inferior, and at the same time, no one should feel superior. This is not solely a case of self-image.

9. What does 1 Corinthians 12:18 tell us about our place in the body? Compare this verse to Ephesians 2:10. Why should we feel neither inferior or superior?

As baptized Christians, we are equal participants in the mission of the Church. In fact, every one of us is indispensable in this mission, even those individuals who appear weak to our sensibilities. You might be saying, "Wait a minute, I thought this was a study on people with disabilities!"

It was! **The lesson to be learned is that God does not consider disabilities when he calls us by Word and Sacrament—he only asks us to do our part**, the part that he has already predetermined us to do. Should we, as the Body of Christ, see anyone any differently?