

The Body Fitly Joined Together (3)

Learning from Those with Special Needs

Last time we considered the sins of pride and envy in the church of Jesus Christ. The church is severely threatened where these sins are allowed to grow and develop. Instead, we are called to see the church as a body, with many members functioning in special, unique ways, all by the grace of God. This time we take a look at members whom we may think are weaker in the body—those with special needs.

You will not find many articles on special needs, especially in a series about church unity. Special needs members, however, play a very important role in the body. Since I am certainly no expert on what it takes to raise such a child, or exactly the role they play, I interviewed some parents who have raised special needs children. I will weave their responses to some of my questions throughout the article.

As we have seen before in this series, the church is compared to a body. Part of the title of this article comes from Ephesians 4:16, a passage that speaks about the church as a body. I Corinthians 12 is another outstanding chapter on the unity of the church as compared to a body. Here the apostle Paul tells us that God has placed every member in the body as it has pleased him.^[1] Paul instructs us further: “the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary.”^[2] This idea of a body is extended now into our study of the place of special needs members in the church.

It is clear that the church body of which we are a part accepts and loves special needs children and adults. Although some are confined to a wheelchair, or have less developed motor skills, or have a difficult time learning at the pace of other children, people love these kids and adults. The world, too, has recognized their physical and mental weakness and has changed certain things accordingly—handicap buttons which open doors, wheelchair ramps, and education tracks which match the students step for step in their learning disabilities. The church has realized this need—special needs education programs in the Christian schools, special outings and programs for the children, and a generous amount of love shown toward those with mental and physical handicaps.

Although we love them, there may be a temptation that we think of special needs children and adults as weaker in the church, in the sense that they may not play as much of a role as other members. As long as we live on this side of the grave, we are tempted to think of our usefulness and ability to serve in the church as based on our

physical strength and mental abilities. Although we would never dare say that special needs people do not play a role in the body, we might still hesitate to think of a few concrete ways that they do serve. What about a boy confined to a wheelchair? What about a man who lives in a home where he must be dressed every morning and fed by others? In what way might they play an important role in the body?

As God says in his word, he “taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man.”^[3] He does not view one’s outward appearance or one’s mental abilities as a standard of a person’s place in the body. We considered this last time a bit with the sins of pride and envy. Man’s standards and man’s judgments on others are often faulty. Instead of taking pleasure in the legs of a man, God takes pleasure in them that fear him, in those of his people that hope in his mercy, as Psalm 147:11 states. And, so it is, God teaches us how to view others in a right way—according to his standards, and not our faulty judgments.

God indeed uses special needs people as vital organs and muscles in the body of Christ. So important are they that they can, in many ways, be our teachers. Below are some spiritual lessons that parents told me their child has taught them over the years.

First, one parent told me that his child humbles human pride. These children as a whole show us that every breath we breathe, every basketball we have the ability to shoot, every shoe we tie, and every math problem we solve, are gifts of God. When we think that we have these things of ourselves, and do not acknowledge God as our creator and sustainer, we are proud of what we have and of what we can do. Special needs children, for example, who cannot walk or throw a ball, remind us that these things are gifts from God, and not things we create ourselves. God gives to each in the body different physical and mental abilities, and to some he gives more liberally than others.

Secondly, according to another parent, just as many of these children are completely dependent on their caretakers, so they teach us to be completely dependent upon our heavenly Father to provide us with all things. So often, as young people, we can find in our lives that we are so rushed and stressed out. Stress in our relationships, stress at work, searching for a college, trying to pay for college, striving to keep the grades up, and trying to squeeze in ten other commitments besides. We worry—“how will I keep afloat? How will I get through this?” And then we look at the young man confined to a wheelchair, barely able to tie his own shoes, and we learn to trust even as he trusts. We learn to look to Father in heaven, who surely provides for his precious people in Jesus Christ, just as he provides for the birds of the air.

Thirdly, one parent pointed out something about his daughter that made me really think. He said that he could see in her physical handicap that she was taken aside in a

special way to live in fuller communion with God. If we are completely honest with ourselves, God is not allowed a lot of room in our schedules. Bible reading, prayer, and meditation on God's word barely squeeze in between texts, wall posts, work, coffee with friends, a biology lab report, and sleep. May we learn from those with special needs the necessity of taking time to commune with God.

Furthermore, this parent told me that his daughter taught him and his wife contentment. She may have never ridden a bike by herself or heroically shot the three-pointer to win the game; she may never live the rigorous and joyful life of a mother, but she has the rich opportunity to live in fellowship with her God! In this way, she has contentment that you and I will likely never know. The pleasures and treasures of this earth do not have the hold on her soul as they have on ours.

Young people, may we learn from those with special needs! May we see their great value and importance in the body of Christ. The reasons listed here for their importance only scratch the surface. Do not hesitate to greet someone with special needs, to talk to them, and to show them by your actions and your conversation that they are very much a vital part of the body. One parent told me that simply saying "how are you" fills them with happiness. Learn from them. Pray both for those with special needs and pray for their parents, too, who sacrifice so much to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord.

Next time, Lord willing, we will consider the place of older members in the body of Christ.