

Ephesians: *Serving Grace*
Ephesians 4:7-12
4/23/2023

As we return to our journey through Ephesians 4, Paul has encouraged the young believers in Asia Minor to walk in a manner worthy of their calling, always being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He then sets out the foundation of the church's unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father who is over all and through all and in all. This morning we will pick up Paul's argument for unity which takes a surprising turn as he marries the church's unity with its God-given diversity.

Please stand and let us read together Ephesians 4:7-12:

⁷But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

⁹(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Giver of Gifts; 2) The Five Offices of the Early Church; and 3) The Purpose of Gifted Leaders.

I. The Giver of Gifts

One of the fundamental truths of the Christian church is that every believer, regardless of age, regardless of race, regardless of gender, regardless of how long they have believed...every believer has been given grace in the form of a gift that serves to grow and strengthen the body of Christ...the Church.

Paul writes in vs. 7: But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Now, there are two kinds of "grace" that Paul refers to in his letters: 1) saving grace; and 2) serving grace. Saving grace is always presented using the Greek word *charis*. When Paul writes "By grace you have been saved" in Ephesians 2:5, he is referring to God's *charis*--His unmerited favor toward unworthy sinners. God's grace was demonstrated when He sent Jesus to die in our place on a Roman cross. God chose to save us through the horrific sacrifice of His beloved Son when we were condemned and dead in our trespasses. He did not save us because we were good or because we had potential...God chose to save us because He "so loved the world." Church, we are saved by grace and grace alone, amen? That's *charis*.

Now, when Paul wants to refer to "serving grace," he will sometimes employ the Greek term *charismata*. *Charismata* refers to the grace given to each believer to serve the Body of Christ in

a particular way...and of course, this yielded our English word, “charisma.” You might recall that these gifts of grace are sometimes referred to as *pneumatikos*, the “gifts of the Spirit” as we see in 1 Corinthians 12:1. But in Romans 12:6 Paul uses the term *charismata* which literally translates “gifts of grace”; and that is more the meaning of what Paul refers to here in Ephesians 4:7.

Now, to be clear, we should not think that *charismata* and *pneumatikos* are referring to different kinds of gifts or different qualities of gifts. I suspect that Paul uses these two terms to refer to the same gifts but with different emphases. Here in Ephesians 4, the point is that Jesus is the gift giver, and the gifts are an expression of our Lord’s grace...they are not given based upon merit or ability or favor; and, the exalted Christ distributes gifts of grace to each believer according to His own measure and purpose. The *means* by which the exalted Jesus delivers those gifts is through “the promise of the Father,”—the Holy Spirit. So, again, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are perfectly unified in their activity and their purpose when it comes to gifting each believer.

We’ll come back to the gifts of grace in a minute, but look now at vs. 8-10:

Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

9 (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

To illustrate Christ’s ascension and the gifts of grace that He imparts to His own, Paul appeals to Psalm 68, in which he sees Jesus as the conquering king who is generous to His subjects. If you have your Bibles, I encourage you to turn back to Psalm 68 because it is likely that Paul had this Psalm in mind when he sat down to write his letter to the Ephesian believers. Psalm 68 celebrates the liberating work of God who delivers His people from their enemies. The Psalmists uses powerful imagery, celebrating that God is the Father of the fatherless and the protector of widows. God is the one who settles the solitary in a home and leads out the prisoners to prosperity.

Paul sees Jesus in Psalm 68. Paul writes: Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives...” As far as Paul is concerned, Jesus is the conquering king of Psalm 68. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, the war is over—the victory is won! The authorities, powers, and principalities are undone. They are like captives in chains who are paraded down the streets in shame by the Conquering King.

Now why would Paul draw upon this imagery at this point in his letter? Well, we must remember that so many of the pagan converts to Christianity lived in dread of the evil spirits. Unlike those in the West, the ancients had a healthy respect for the unseen world, and it was this concern regarding evil spirits that would tempt many infant believers to fall back into the practices of idolatry and witchcraft. So, Paul makes it clear: the triumphant, ascended Jesus has

triumphed over the enemies of our souls like a conquering king who leads a train of captives through the streets in a parade of victory and celebration!

Paul writes: “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” Now, if you have your Bibles open, you know that Paul is quoting Psalm 68:18, which (in the ESV) reads: You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and *receiving gifts among men*, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.

So...what are we to make of this situation? Our ESV translation reads that the conquering king was “receiving gifts among men” whereas Paul writes that the conquering king “gave gifts to men.”

Well, let us first give Paul credit that he understood the Hebrew language better than we do since Paul was a Hebrew-speaking Jew and a highly trained Pharisee. Paul knew the scriptures intimately, and we never see Paul force a text to say something it does not. We also know that there were a few ancient copies of the Hebrew Bible (the Syriac version in particular) that translate this verse as saying, “he gave gifts to men”; though, the more popular and common Hebrew texts report that the king is said to “receive gifts.” I suspect that the Apostle Paul, a former Pharisee and a pupil of Israel’s most famous teacher, was aware of both translations and felt that the Syriac translation was most fitting to make his point. We must also take historical context into consideration. NT scholar John Stott writes:

We need to remember that after every conquest in the ancient world there was invariably both a receiving of tribute and a distribution of largesse. What conquerors took from their captives, they gave away to their own people. The spoils were divided, the booty was shared.

This, of course, is Paul’s point: Jesus has conquered sin and death on our behalf. He is our Liberator; and as such, He has provided gifts to His people.

Paul then adds an interesting commentary to his quote in vss. 9-10: 9: (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

Paul sees in Psalm 68 a foreshadowing of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. Jesus first descended on our behalf. He descended from heaven to earth, taking on flesh, making Himself a servant. He then descended to the cross; taking on our sin and shame. He then “descended into hell” (according to our creed) as Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:18-19, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison...” It’s hard to know how much of that “descending” Paul intends to convey here in Ephesians 4, but clearly Paul is celebrating that the Christ who descended on our behalf has triumphantly ascended now to the right hand of the Father in victory. And notice, Paul emphasizes that it is the same One who both descended and now has ascended. In other words, the One who now sits at the right hand of God the Father is the same One who sympathizes with our pain and suffering. The One who understands hunger, want, and loneliness is the same One

who intercedes for His Church on His seat of glory! Church...be encouraged! When Christ arose and ascended to the Father, He did not leave us with a “Christless” existence on earth. Instead, writes Paul, He ascended “that He might fill all things.” Jesus is no longer bound by time and space as He was when He walked the earth 2,000 years ago. The ascended Christ now “fills all” the earth through the powerful presence of His Holy Spirit, through whom He endows every believer with gifts of grace. He is the One who understands our hurts, our temptations, and our suffering...and He is the Overcomer...He has won our victory, amen?

Let us now turn to my second subheading:

II. Five Offices of the Early Church

In vs. 11 Paul continues, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...”

As the Geek with the Greek, I’m a little unhappy with the ESV’s translation here because it does not reflect the “*min/de*” that is in the Greek text. Now...don’t be confused. I did not say, “Man...DUH!” I’m referring to the use of two Greek words *min* and *de* that typically create the sense of “on the one hand, but on the other hand”. In the Greek text, Paul literally writes that “He gave *min* the apostles, *de* the prophets, *de* the evangelists, *de* the pastors and teachers.”

Since that phrase is awkward to translate in the English, many translations read that “He has graced *some* to be apostles, *some* to be prophets, *some* to be evangelists, and *some* to be pastors and teachers.” I think that may be a more helpful translation because the emphasis here is that the exalted Christ apportions serving grace differently amongst the members of His Church. In other words, not all are gifted to serve as apostles. Some are gifted to serve as prophets; others are gifted to serve as evangelists; and still others are gifted to serve as pastors and teachers.

Now, in case you are wondering which of the five gifts you have been given, you should know that this particular list of “gifts” refers primarily to the offices of church leadership. However, Paul lists many more gifts normally associated with all believers in Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; and he provides another list in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30. The Apostle Peter also lists a few of the gifts in 1 Peter 4:10-11. NT scholar John Stott observes that there are at least 20 various gifts listed in the New Testament, and he is quite certain that there are likely many more that were never listed. Even so, we know of at least 20 that are listed in the New Testament, and I encourage you to spend some time digging into those scriptures to learn more about the gifts of grace that our Lord imparts to His Church.

Here in Ephesians 4:11, Paul specifically lists the gifts of grace entrusted to *leaders* in the early church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

First and above all others, Paul refers to those who were set apart as apostles in the first century church. The word “apostle” literally translates as “the sent.” The term predates Christianity.

Prior to Christ, the word “apostle” would have typically been used to denote an official ambassador sent by a king. The messenger would serve as an emissary of the throne, bearing the authority of the one who sent him.

Now, whenever we think about apostles in the New Testament, we should first and foremost acknowledge that the Apostles of Christ were those chosen by Jesus who walked with Jesus and bore witness to His resurrection. This unique qualification of an Apostle is articulated in Acts 1:21-22 when the Eleven are looking to replace Judas the Betrayer. The apostles say to one another:

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”

Luke reports that Matthias was chosen for the role of an “apostle” because he met those criteria.

To the best of my knowledge, with the exception of Matthias, every apostle in the New Testament was specifically called and set apart for that role by Jesus personally, including the Apostle Paul.¹

For this reason, I am very reticent when it comes to people calling themselves “apostles” in the 21st century. In fact, if you ever meet a person who refers to himself or herself as an “apostle,” I suggest you keep your distance. It would take a tremendous degree of arrogance to take on the title of “apostle,” and the authority one assumes with that title is beyond dangerous in my opinion. That is not to say that our Lord no longer graces individuals with apostolic-like giftings that are akin to what we see in the Apostle Paul. These would be believers who have had a powerful, personal encounter with Christ; they are those who have an incredible drive to spread the Gospel in those regions where the Gospel has never been proclaimed; and they would be those who are unafraid to be persecuted for their faith, even at the expense of their own lives. However, even those with apostolic-like giftings are not “Apostles” according to a New Testament definition. The Apostles were eyewitnesses and those entrusted by Jesus to bear witness to the resurrection and to establish His Church. Along with many scholars of the New Testament, I would submit that we no longer have Apostles on earth. The witness and authority of the Apostles has been given to us in the New Testament.

Paul then lists another group of gifted leaders, the prophets. The prophets were those who spoke through the power of the Holy Spirit, not so much to foretell the future as to “forthtell” the Word of the Lord. We don’t have many named prophets in the New Testament apart from Abagus. In Acts 11, Abagus predicts a huge famine over the entire Roman Empire, and his prediction comes

¹ There are some in the NT like Barnabas (Acts 14:4), Adronicus, and Junias (Rom. 16:7) who may have also been called apostles. Some suggest that James, the brother of Jesus, was also known as an “apostle,” though that designation is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. The fact that he is thought to have written a letter that made it into the New Testament is a strong argument for his inclusion. John Stott recognizes three different kinds of “apostles”: 1) the general apostolic mission of all believers who are “sent” into the world as witnesses and disciple-makers; 2) those who are sent messengers (apostles) of the church (2 Cor. 8:23); and 3) the Apostles of Christ, referring to the Twelve (including Matthias after the betrayal of Judas), the Apostle Paul, James the brother of Christ, and possibly two others. See John Stott: *The Message of Ephesians*, p 160.

true. He was one of several prophets who came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, so we are left to believe that there were many “prophets” set apart by God in the first century. William Barclay notes that prophets in the early church were wanderers. They would move on from town to town, proclaiming the Word of the Lord and calling out the sins and consequences of those who opposed God. The prophets were not very popular people. They were typically met with resistance and were often the first to be martyred for their faith. Their office was also the first to fall to corruption. Some of the earliest Christian writings not found in the New Testament are called the *Didache, the Teaching of the Twelve Disciples*. Dated to about AD 100, these writings instruct the early church to offer room and board to the wandering prophet for two days, but state that if he asks to stay for a third day, he is to be considered a false prophet! He is also to be considered a false prophet if he claims to hear a word from the Lord that would have him get money or a free meal!²

Again, the specific role of Prophet seems to be very rare if not extinct. NT scholar Dr. Kent Hughes writes what is the largely held position amongst Reformed scholars: The apostles and prophets with their unique endowments did not extend beyond the apostolic age.³

I don’t have the confidence to say that there are no more prophets ever, but I would be extremely reticent to trust a person who referred to himself as a “prophet.” The office of “prophet” is no small matter, and we must take extreme caution in trusting such a person, holding every utterance and prophecy up to the revealed Word of God. The vast majority of Christian scholars and thinkers agree that we have the full, final, authoritative revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments. That is to say, if a “prophet” claims to have new revelation that is inconsistent with the Bible, that person is a false prophet.

Again, there are surely those who have “prophetic gifts.” These are people who get unique and powerful insights from the Holy Spirit that bring light to how the truth of the Scriptures critiques the cultural moment. Those with prophetic gifts may even “hear a word from the Lord” in a way that most of us don’t. I have met people who I believe have that gifting. However, it’s one thing to have prophetic gifts; it’s quite another to claim the office of prophet.

The third office that Paul refers to is that of the evangelist. The evangelist is one who, by the grace and gifting of our Lord, has been given the ability to clearly proclaim the Gospel in a way that penetrates to the heart of unbelievers and often leads large numbers of people to make a commitment of faith. We need only to think of Billy Graham or Luis Palau to appreciate the unique gifts and office of the evangelist. I never met Richard Beech, but from all the stories I have heard from Pastor Bob, I suspect Richard Beech was an evangelist as well—one who served here at Colonial and led hundreds of people to the Lord! Although evangelists are highly regarded and play a crucial role in the greater church and advancement of God’s kingdom, evangelists are usually not committed to serve in one particular congregation.

² William Barclay: *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p 147.

³ Kent Hughes: *Preaching the Word-Ephesians*, p 131,

The last two offices of the early church listed by Paul are “pastor” and “teacher.” The word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.” The shepherd-leader is one who cares for the “sheep.” In John 21 Jesus told Peter; “Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.” The pastor is one who has been called to tend and feed those “lambs” who belong to Jesus. We often think of pastors as “under-shepherds” because Jesus is The Good Shepherd (John 10) and the “My Shepherd” that David rights about in Psalm 23. Even so, the pastor/under-shepherd bears a great deal of responsibility when it comes to the local church. NT scholar William Barclay writes:

The shepherd of the flock of God is the man who bears God’s people on his heart, who feeds them with the truth, who seeks them when they stray away, and who defends them from all that would hurt their faith.

Now, in his listing of gifted leaders, Paul does not separate pastor and teacher in the way that he denoted separation in the first part of his list. In some respects, it seems that Paul listed pastor and teacher together, although they still have distinction. Many commentators note that all pastors must be teachers, but not all teachers have the gifts or calling to pastor. The teachers are gifted leaders who have the ability to teach and communicate the truths of the scriptures and how those scriptures apply to the lives of believers. Many of you know that we have six pastor/shepherds over this congregation, but we have dozens of gifted teachers! We are also blessed with Elders and Deacons, two other offices of the church that Paul unpacks in his pastoral letters.

Now, on account of time, we must move on to my third and final subheading and consider:

III. The Purpose of Gifted Leaders

Paul writes that God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to the early church, but to what end? Look at vs. 11-12: 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

The gifted leaders of the church exist “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Church, please don’t miss this. Paul has clearly stated that grace has been given to each believer according to the measure of Christ’s gift. That’s the real point...serving grace has been given to all believers. The Lord then gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the believers for the work of ministry.

I have a friend named Bryan (I actually have a dozen friends named Brian, but this particular Bryan is one of my dearest friends and fishing buddies). Twice in the past two weeks Bryan has called me to share a story of how he took my Palm Sunday sermon and used it to minister to people he had met in the marketplace. Now...as a pastor/teacher, nothing pleases me more than to learn that my work equipped a believer to do ministry...because that’s my job. My job is not to DO THE MINISTRY for you, or in front of you, or for your mild entertainment. My job...my role...my gift of grace from Jesus is to be equip you all, the believing Church, to do the ministry that God has graced you to do both in the church and in the world!

And the ultimate end of me doing what I've been set apart to do...along with you doing what you have been set apart to do...is the 'building up of the Body of Christ.' We'll come back to this point next Sunday, but listen: the only way that we can be effective as the Body of Christ is if every member has a ministry. My ultimate goal as your pastor would be to stroll through the lobby on any given Sunday and ask each and every person, "Tell me about your ministry." To which, each and every member of this Body would delight in sharing the ministry that they enjoy through the serving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Church, our unity...our Oneness depends upon the complimentary gifts of the Body. If we are all serving and doing our part, the Body of Christ will flourish for the glory of God. If only a few are serving, the Body suffers, amen?

Again, we'll come back to this point next week, but for now, here's your assignment: Read 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 and give some thought to the various gifts that are listed by the Apostle Paul. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how you have been gifted as a believer, and ask Jesus to ignite that gift into a burning flame for the Kingdom of God.

If you are eager to serve and don't know where to start, please set up an appointment with the Connections Director at your campus...we are eager to help you find your place to serve!

In closing, I am so profoundly grateful for the hundreds of souls here at Colonial who do serve week in and week out with tremendous humility, faithfulness, and excellence. So much of what we do as a church happens quietly with little fanfare or recognition, and yet the influence of this congregation is felt throughout the world. On behalf of this Body of Christ called Colonial, thank you. Thank you for committing yourselves to using the serving grace that Christ has entrusted to you for the building up of the Body and for the glory of God! Let us continue to press on, with each member serving according to the grace that has been given to us, until the whole world hears!

Will you pray with me?