

“GIFTS THAT BUILD THE CHURCH” **(Ephesians 4:7-12)**

Not long ago I was looking in my wallet for something and noticed how much stuff I had accumulated over time. I decided it was time to do a little spring cleaning and along with miscellaneous scraps of paper with notes and phone numbers on them, I found a library card that had long since expired, and I found an insurance card from an insurance company I was no longer with. I also found a couple of gift cards I had never used. One was a Visa gift card that had expired, and the other was a Subway gift card that was tucked behind several other cards. If you gave those to me, my apologies for not using them and I hope that doesn't keep you from giving me things in the future.

I have read that gifts cards are one of the most popular gifts given – it's a great stocking stuffer when you don't know what else to give – but the shocker is that a whopping \$50 billion worth of gift cards have never been used – they're just sitting in wallets or drawers and forgotten.

You can wait to check your wallets until after the sermon, but there are an equally surprising number of Christians who have been given spiritual gifts from God that are not being used. Napoleon once pointed to a map of China and said, “There lies a sleeping giant. If it ever wakes up, it will be unstoppable.” The church is a sleeping giant – if every believer were to wake up and realize all they've been given by the Lord, and put what they've been given into use, the church would be unstoppable.

In the past couple of weeks we've been looking at the first six verses of Ephesians 4 where the Apostle Paul talks about the unity of the church. Unity, as we've seen, is not something we create or organize, it's something that we already have by our shared faith in Christ. Our responsibility is to make every effort to keep it. Now beginning in verse 7 Paul switches gears a bit to talk about our *diversity* in the body of Christ. The beauty of the church is that while we are one in spirit and purpose, we are made up of individuals who each have something unique to contribute to the building up of the church.

Verses 7-16 is a unit of thought, and in verses 7-12 Paul talks about how Christ builds His church, and in verses 13-16 he talks about the goal and purpose of the church. These verses are among the most important verses in the New Testament on the church, and is something like a blueprint for what makes a healthy, thriving church. The church, as a reminder, is not a building or an address where people meet – the church is the people whom God has called out from the world to be set apart to Him. God wants to use the church to show the world who He is – to be lights shining in a dark world. The church is not just another club or group – the church is the body of Christ on earth. Paul's passion in Ephesians is that we would grasp our calling and purpose as a church, and fulfill all that the church is supposed to be.

Let's begin by reading verses 7-12... “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.’ (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

An easy way to outline the flow of this passage is to see: the *gifted* in verse 7, the *giver* in verses 8-10, and *gifts* in verses 11-12. Each communicates an important truth about God's plan for the church.

First, we see the gifted in verse 7... “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” The word “but” indicates a transition. Having talked about the unity of the church, Paul is now going to talk about the diversity of the church – and he says to each one “grace” has been given. Grace means receiving something good that we didn’t earn and don’t deserve. In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul has used grace in the context of our salvation – it is by grace we have been saved. As rebellious sinners we deserve God’s judgment, but in grace He rescued us by sending His Son to pay the penalty for our sin. Now Paul says that God continues pouring out His grace on us after we’re saved by giving us gifts to contribute to the building of His church.

Don’t miss the words “each one” – each one of us have been given a gift by God’s grace. By saying “each one” Paul highlights a key truth about the church, and that is that each individual member has a role to play in the building of the church. Rick Warren, in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, uses the phrase “every member ministry.” A true, biblical church means that every member of the church body is involved and contributes to the ministry.

There’s a common saying that’s been around for years that says that 20% of the people in church do 80% of the work, while 80% of the people watch the 20% do the work. But God designed the church for 100% of people to be involved in the work, and every member of the church is important and needed.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul compares the church body to the human body and how each part of the body is needed for the overall health of the body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” and the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” Every part of the body has an important role to play. As I mentioned last week, our little pinky toe may not seem all that important, but without it we would not be able to balance and walk. A healthy body needs its respiratory system, its nervous system, and its circulatory system to all be working in harmony – if one part is not working right, it affects the whole body.

God has called every believer to be part of the ministry of the local church, and each member has an important role to play. A ministry is any act of service for God or other people done in Jesus’ name. Some ministries are ongoing and regular, such as serving on the worship team, serving on the safety team, serving in children’s church and the nursery, serving in youth group or MOPS, and many other ministries I’m sure I’m leaving out.

But there are also a host of “unofficial” ministries such as calling someone to check in on them, or sending an encouraging card or text to someone who is hurting, or giving someone a financial gift to help someone in need. In fact, a great deal of ministry goes on in this church that I don’t even know about. The church is full of “official” or “organized” ministries, as well as spontaneous ministries that take place that we don’t always see.

Four passages in the New Testament talk about spiritual gifts – this passage in Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12. Each passage has a list of gifts, and when you combine all the gifts mentioned there are about 19-20. It’s important to understand that these lists are examples of gifts God gives, but not an exhaustive list. Every member of the church has a gift or combination of gifts.

Much has been made about finding your spiritual gift, and there are any number of tests you can take to help you discover how God has gifted you – but the tried-and-true way of finding your spiritual gift is to get involved in the life of the church and start serving. As you do you find out what you do best and what brings you the most delight.

And over time your gifting will be affirmed by others in the body. They'll say, "You have a natural way with kids," or "You know how to organize something and get it done," or "You have such a big heart for hurting people." The rest of the body will affirm your gift.

Another way to discern your gift is to ask, "What am I passionate about? What burden has God placed in my heart that won't let go? If I could do one thing to serve the Lord, I would do this." The main thing is to jump into the life of the church, start serving, start contributing and your gifting will come to light.

Notice also that each gift is given "*as Christ apportioned it.*" It's easy to compare your gifting to someone else's and feel like you got the short end of the deal. When we first started livestreaming during Covid, I listened to myself preach online and almost every pastor I talked to thought the same thing: What am I even doing preaching? Not really, but it was a little painful to watch yourself, and it didn't help to listen to other preachers that have these amazing deep voices with perfect diction and think, "God must have skipped over me when He was handing out preaching voices." No matter where you look, you're going to find those who are better at something that you are, and that's by God's design – He sovereignly apportions gifts as He sees fit.

The good news is that I'm only responsible to use what has been apportioned to me and no more. This is reflected in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 where the Lord gives some five talents, some two, and some one. If you're a five-talent kind of person, you are responsible to use what the Lord has given you, and the Bible says to whom much is given, much will be required. If you have one talent, live up to that calling and don't look over the fence at what someone else has. When we get to heaven we'll be judged and rewarded for what we've done with what we've been given. If you are a little pinky toe, be the best pinky toe you can be – because your part in the body is indispensable, and together we use our unique gifts to build up the whole body of Christ.

In verse 7 Paul emphasizes our obligation to use the gift we've been given, and in verses 8-10 he gives us a grand, cosmic motivation for using our gifts. In verse 7 he quotes a verse from Psalm 68:18... "This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.'"

In Psalm 68 David, the psalmist, pictures a victorious king returning to Jerusalem after winning a battle. In Old Testament times it was common for Israel to be invaded by enemies who would loot and plunder their land, and carry off their young men to use as slaves. Imagine that you're one of those slaves, and you've been held captive for several months. But one day you look up and see your king come charging in with his army and sets you free. Not only that, but he takes captive those who had captured you.

It was customary when returning home for the victorious army to hold a victory parade, ascending up to Jerusalem with the king leading the way, followed by his army and all those who have been freed. At the end of the victory parade are the enemies who have been taken captive and all the spoils of war that belong to the victor. Once the parade was completed, the king would share the spoils of war with the people so that everyone participated in the victory.

Paul uses Psalm 68 as a picture of Christ's victory over His enemies, and giving His people gifts. In verses 9-10 Paul gives us a grand, sweeping picture of Christ descending to earth and ascending to heaven... "(What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)"

In order to ascend back to heaven as the victorious king, Christ had to first descend to earth to free us from captivity. Paul says He descended to the “lower, earthly regions.” Most commentators take this to refer to Christ’s incarnation, when He left the glory and splendor of heaven and descended to earth in human flesh, going to the lowest depths of humility. Paul explains this in Philippians 2:7-8 where he says, “He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” As we sang earlier, Jesus came from heaven to earth – from the earth to the cross – from the cross to the grave – from the grave to the sky.

By descending to earth and dying for our sins, Christ defeated the enemies of sin and death and Satan that had long kept us captive. He rendered them powerless, and his ascension back to heaven was a victory parade showing His triumph over sin and death and Satan.

Not only did Christ win the victory, but He shares with us the spoils of war, giving us gifts to continue His work on earth. Look again at verse 10... “He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.” Christ ascended back to heaven so that He might fill the whole universe. Fill it with what? With all that He is – with His power and authority and blessing and love. Since He has ascended back to heaven and is no longer on earth, He fills the universe through the church, and He gives gifts each member of the body to build His church. The more the church grows and thrives, the more the universe is filled with Christ – and the way the church grows and thrives is by each of us using our gifts.

Paul talked about this in Ephesians 1:22-23... “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” The church is the fullness of Christ on earth – we represent Him to the world. While on earth Jesus ministered to people through teaching and healing and serving – by leading and exhorting and giving. Now that He has ascended back to heaven, He continues His work on earth through us. That’s what Paul wants us to see – he wants us to grasp our cosmic calling to be the hands and feet of Christ to the world.

In verses 11-12 Paul gets practical and shows us God’s plan for building the church, and it begins with giving the church gifted leaders to equip the church body to do the work of the ministry. This is a key concept for understanding church ministry – everyone in church, not just the leaders, is to be involved in the work of the ministry.

In verses 11-12 Paul writes, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service.” As we’ve seen, Christ is the head of the church, and as the head He gifts certain people to lead the church – they are equal with everyone else in the church body, but are assigned the role of leading. Paul mentions four kinds of leaders that were instrumental in laying the foundation of the early church, and the first two mentioned are the apostles and the prophets. In Ephesians 2:20 Paul said the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The apostles and prophets were unique in church history – they laid the foundation of the church, and for the past 2000 years we have been building on that foundation.

The word apostle means “one who is sent.” It was used in the ancient world to describe someone who represented the king and carried the authority of the king. While He was on earth Jesus had many disciples, but He selected twelve disciples to be apostles to represent Him and to go out into the world with His authority.

To be an apostle you had to have been with Jesus and you had to have been an eyewitness of His resurrection, which means no one today can be an apostle like the twelve commissioned by Jesus. They were uniquely chosen by God at a certain point in time, and they – and those close to them – were given the task of writing the New Testament.

While there are no more apostles today like the twelve original apostles, all of us are apostles in the sense that we too are sent out into the world. We can think of the original twelve as Big “A” apostles, and we today as small “a” apostles. Small “a” apostles would be missionaries and church planters – those that go out and start churches and get them off the ground.

The word “prophets” is a little more difficult to define, but in a general sense a prophet in the Bible was someone who spoke the truth of God to others. A prophet not only revealed truth about the future – the way we normally think of a prophet – but they also spoke God’s truth to the present, instructing people in the way they should live.

In this context, Paul refers to the prophets God used to write the New Testament – apostles like Paul and Luke and Peter and John – who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the 27 books of the New Testament which laid the doctrinal foundation of the early church. The early church devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching – and everything we believe and do as a church today is built on the foundation of God’s Word as revealed by the prophets.

The next foundational gift is “evangelists.” In the early church evangelists were similar to apostles in that they went throughout the world spreading the gospel. Philip was an early example of an evangelist in Acts 8 as he went out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to proclaim the good news. Evangelists are important to the building up of the church by bringing new people into the church. God wants the church to continually have an outward focus – reaching out beyond the church walls to lost people who need to hear the gospel.

Some people are uniquely gifted in telling people about Jesus – not just a public speaker like Billy Graham – but those who have a way with connecting with people and always look for opportunities to share Christ with them. God calls all of us to be evangelists and to be ready at all times to share our faith so that more people will be brought into the church and fill the universe with Christ.

The fourth leadership gift is “pastor-teacher” – two words that refer to one person. While evangelists bring people into the church, pastor-teachers build up the people by pastoring and teaching. The word pastor means “shepherd,” and as a shepherd is to take care of the flock. The shepherd knows the sheep, he feeds the sheep, he leads them in the right way, he corrects sheep that wander, and protects the sheep from those who want to harm them.

The word “teacher” means someone who is gifted at teaching God’s Word. Someone can be a teacher without being a pastor, but according to the Bible a pastor must have the ability to teach. Teaching is a vital part of building the church – as we’ll see next week in verse 14, without solid teaching people will be like infants who are blown here and there by errant teaching. Every believer needs regular teaching of God’s Word so that we grow into strong, mature believers.

Apostles launch churches and get them off the ground, prophets reveal God's truth to the church, evangelists grow the church by leading people to Christ and bringing them into the church, and pastor-teachers care for the needs of the church and teach the truths of God's Word. But the ministry of gifted leaders is just part of the ministry of the church. In verse 12 Paul says their job is... "to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." In God's design for the church, the leaders equip the people to do the work of the ministry. We're all in it together – whether you are leading or serving – we all have a part to play in the building up of the church.

This has taken on a special meaning for me over the many years I have battled with physical pain. God put me on earth to be a pastor and I love everything about being a pastor – I love teaching, I love shepherding and caring for people, I love getting out and being an evangelist – but my pain and lack of mobility limit what I'm able to do – I hate being limited, but I've come to accept it.

The silver lining in all this is that it has created space for the church body to do the work of the ministry – just like Paul is talking about here – and instead of me doing everything, you guys have picked up much of the slack. It blesses me to no end to have you go visit someone in the hospital, or go visit a shut-in, or to take part in important aspects of the ministry that are often a struggle for me to do. They're all things that I would love to do myself, but as Paul says, "My power is made perfect in weakness," and together we all share in the work of the ministry.

Paul says the leaders of the church "equip" the people for works of ministry. The word "equip" is hard to define, but it has the idea of "making someone adequate or sufficient to serve a purpose." The word equip was used of James and John mending their nets so that they would be adequate to catch fish. It is used in the Greek language to describe setting a broken bone back in place, and of a host getting a room ready for his guests. The idea is that pastor-teachers are to teach the Word to help the rest of the body become adequate or prepared so that they may serve the Lord in accordance with their gifts.

God has given each of us a gift, and when you've been blessed with a gift you have an obligation to use that gift – to not let it sit in your wallet – but to use it. Using your gift is not just an obligation, but a privilege – as a believer you are part of Christ's victory parade – you've been set free from sin and death and Satan, and you've received gifts from the victor. You're a vital part of Christ's cosmic purpose to build His church and fill the universe with His glory. You're on this earth for a purpose, and you have a gift that uniquely contributes to that purpose. Together may God use us to build His worldwide church and fill the universe with the fullness of Christ.