

## Christ, the Victor Who Gives Gifts To His Church

Ephesians 4:7-12

### ***Introduction***

What God has done for us in our salvation through Jesus Christ had been the focus. And now we are urged to live in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ. And as we are urged to walk worthy, the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, moves into a discussion on how we mature as the church of Jesus Christ.

-From Ephesians 4 we learn **four vital areas** that will make a great deal of difference in becoming a mature church while we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

-*Our heart*-God has intended our faith to change the way we think and what we desire and find pleasure in. This is the transformation of our heart which has initially taken place in our regeneration and is now in the process of being perfected in our sanctification. And so in Eph.4:1-3 Paul addresses the attitudes of our heart.

-*Our doctrine*-Through the revelation of God recorded in the teachings of Scripture we are able to know what is true and real. How well we hold to and apply the truth of God's Word determines whether we walk in the light and grow to have a heart of wisdom. And because this is so important, in Eph.4:4-6 we are given seven fundamental assertions that are vital to our faith and life.

-*Our leadership*-Throughout the ages God has used leaders to influence His people to know God, to understand His purposes, and to fulfill His plans not only for God's people but for the world around them.

-*Our gifts*-We can only grow to maturity through the practice of spiritual gifts which God has given us. What we will learn is that these spiritual abilities given by God have their richest impact on the church as each member fully and properly use their gifts. Not one of us can do it all. Our interdependence and the full and proper function of our gifts will contribute to the strength and maturity of the church and what God does for His glory.

These four matter very much-our heart, our doctrine, our leadership, and our gifts. Now last week we looked at the first two vital areas, our heart and our doctrine.

So this week, we will look at the next two vital areas, our leadership and gifts.

Our text today begins with a contrast expressed through the conjunction-"But". Paul has been speaking of the unity of the church and has urged us to be eager to maintain our unity through Christ-like attitudes like humility and through a oneness of faith. But within this unity is a wonderful diversity. And this diversity is expressed in the variety of gifts that each one of us as believers has been given by Jesus Christ. Christ has sovereignly given a variety of gifts to His church, and each one is vital for the church to become mature in its knowledge of Christ and its transformation into the image of Christ.

So as we turn to our text, in the first place, we are given a picture of Christ as the victor, leading captives in His victory parade and distributing gifts because of His victory. Second, we are taught Christ's sovereignty in distributing gifts to his church. As Lord of the church He distributes the gifts as He sees fit. And third, we are told Christ's plan to equip and mature the

church through these gifts. Let's consider each of these points and how we, ourselves, can grow in maturity.

## **1. Christ's Victory To Fulfill Everything He Has Purposed Vv 7-10**

First, Christ's Victory which enables Him to give gifts to His church and fulfill everything he has purposed in and through us.

### **A. Grace given to each of us**

Our text begins by saying, "*But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*" There are two fundamental ideas for grace in the New Testament. Grace is first of all, God's favor, His kind, undeserved favor. So when God says in Ephesians 2:8—"For by grace you have been saved," it refers to God's unmerited favor. But grace is also a power or an ability which is given by God. So when Paul explains in Ephesians 3:2—"you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace given to me," he is speaking of the ability given to Paul by God to fulfill his ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

So, when we are told that grace was given to us, it speaks of Christ's kindness shown to us in giving a power or an ability that we do not have in ourselves. But what is this power or ability? Looking at what follows it seems quite clear that power or ability specifically speaks of what Paul describes in another context as the spiritual gifts Christ has given to His church.

But instead of explaining what these spiritual gifts are, like Paul does in other texts like Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, He emphasizes what Christ had to do in order for us to be given this grace.

### **B. Christ's victory to win the right to give gifts to His church**

1) The reason that we are blessed with a variety of gifts which empower the church to fulfill everything that God has purposed, is Christ's victory won at the cross.

At first, it seemed like the cross was a great defeat for God. Jesus, who came to set us free from our sin, was being put to death at the hands of a paranoid politician and bitter religious leaders. But as Christ hung on the cross, dying, He was accomplishing the very thing that God had sovereignly purposed Him to do. His death was the full payment for sin before a holy God. The cross was THE decisive victory which fulfilled every righteous demand of God so that God could now bring His salvation to the ends of the earth, and fulfill everything that He had purposed.

Illustration-In explaining Christ's victory, Paul refers to Psalm 68, which is both a psalm of praise for the victories God had given Israel in the past, but also a prayer for what David needed God to do as he was being attacked by his enemies. In verse 18 of the Psalm, David reflects upon the past victories, and he describes God as the conqueror who has returned from battle, and is now leading those he captured in the victory parade before his countrymen.

Illustration-Back in those days, when one nation conquered another, a huge parade was set up for the general and his army to march through the streets of the nation's capitol with those they captured to make a spectacle of them and to celebrate their victory.

In Colossians, another letter that was written around the same time as Ephesians, Paul refers to a time in which God disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame (2:15). It is generally believed that God did this when He raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

But here in Ephesians it speaks of Christ's ascension being the time when the victory parade took place. What we might conclude is that Christ's death was the determination of victory, His resurrection was the declaration of His victory, and His ascension was the culmination of His victory. When Christ ascended to heaven He led the spiritual rulers and authorities captive and He was crowned the great Victor, and then was seated at the right hand of the Father. This was the culmination of His victory, and as it was culminated He sent His Spirit at Pentecost and began giving gifts to His disciples.

2) But Paul reminds us that before the culmination of His victory, Christ had to first descend—*"In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?"*

We may think that the descent to the lower parts of the earth speaks of Christ's descent into Hades after His crucifixion which is referred to in 1 Peter 3:19. But the descent in Ephesians 4 may refer to Christ's incarnation. Psalm 139:15 graphically describes a baby's conception and growth in the womb of a mother as being skillfully made *"in the depths of the earth,"* a very similar statement made here in verse 9.

Application-But the point is this, the grace you and I experience in being given spiritual gifts has come at the price of Christ lowering Himself to become a man and to be crucified, so all glory goes to Him. As much as we appreciate the gifts of CJ Mahaney and John Piper and Al Mohler and our own Ken Mellinger, in eternity all praise will go to Jesus Christ who paid the great price for these gifts, and whose victory became our victory as it led God to pour out His abundant grace upon us. We are greatly blessed because of Christ. All praise be to Him.

## **2. Christ's Sovereignty In Distributing Gifts To His Church v 11**

### **A. Christ has given gifts to each member in His church**

Now in these statements we also see Christ's sovereignty in distributing gifts to His church. Christ is the one who controls the distribution of the gifts. So first of all, in His sovereignty, we see that He has made sure that no true believer is left out of being given a particular gift(s) for the benefit of the church. *"But grace was given to each one of us,"* we are told.

"No one misses out on Christ's bounty," says Peter T O'Brien. Therefore, every believer has been given a gift for the growth of the church. I can hear someone say though, "Come on. My gift is not that important."

### **B. Christ only gives essential gifts for the benefit of the church**

Oh really? Did you notice the statement which follows? We are not only told that grace is given to each one of us, but that this grace is given "according to the measure of Christ gift." What is being said here, is that any particular gift as well as the measure of ability given with the gift is all "in proportion to what Christ intended to give."

We don't determine what gift we are given nor if our gift is important or not. But we know this, Christ does not give junk gifts, as though some of us are given what is left over on the clearance rack at K-Mart. Christ's giving is very intentional and so each gift is essential.

Illustration-John MacArthur illustrates this by pointing out that sometimes the gifts we are given are not always that useful, and so they end up in the drawer or sometimes we even give them to someone else. I think this is where the "White Elephant" gift exchange came

from. But MacArthur reminds us that “God never gives such gifts. Each of His is exactly what we need to fulfill our work for Him. We never get the wrong gift, or too much or too little of it. When the Holy Spirit gave us our gift, He presented us with precisely the right blend of abilities and enablement we need to serve God. Not only does our unique giftedness make us an irreplaceable member of Christ’s body but it is a mark of God’s great love to single each of us out for unique blessing and ministry.”

So we see that Christ’s death and resurrection won the victory which gave Him the right to give gifts to His church, these gifts are like the spoils of His victory. And He is sovereignly distributing these gifts to each one of us as He sees different needs in the church and in His kingdom. Finally, we are told in verses 11-12 Christ’s plan to equip and mature the church through His gifts.

### **3. Christ’s Plan To Equip and Mature the Church Through His Gifts vv 11-12**

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

Here is Christ’s plan: He equips the church through leaders who minister God’s Word. And through their equipping role, each member of the church is then prepared to serve in a variety of ministries so that through the proper function of all the gifts the church is built up. And as the church builds itself up, it matures into the likeness of Christ and becomes His instrument to fill this world with His rule.

This is His plan. First, He is equipping His church through leaders who minister God’s Word.

#### **A. Christ equipping His church through the teaching of God’s Word**

When we are told that Christ gave the apostles and prophets and evangelists, and pastors and teachers, all four or five people mentioned here have one thing in common. They are all ministers of the Word.

This indicates to us the importance of God’s Word to the life and maturity of the church. We cannot live and grow without it. It also tells us the source by which the church will be equipped.

Folks, we are living in a day in which there is such a strong movement away from the Word toward pragmatism; that at least in our practice we are saying that the Word of God is not sufficient to effectively equip us for life and service. But that is not what is indicated here. Every role God has given to equip the church has to do with the ministry of His Word.

It begins with apostles and prophets. We have already seen in chapter 2:20 that the teaching of the apostles and prophets is the foundation for the church. God revealed His Word through these men in particular, who then wrote down His Word through the power of the Holy Spirit so that even though they used their own literary style they wrote the very words of God. So the apostles and prophets were the ones through whom we received God’s Word. But one distinction between them is that the apostles were also responsible for overseeing the expansion and protection of the church.

Because this need continues today, Sovereign Grace Ministries has men who serve us in this same role, and we are very thankful for them. They serve us so well through their oversight. And so we first see the foundational role given to the apostles and prophets.

Next God has given evangelists. These are men who obviously proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. And while these men are clearly involved in the itinerate work of spreading the gospel, the Ephesians 4 evangelist is also responsible for equipping the saints for the purpose of the church's ministry to the lost. He teaches the church how to effectively communicate the gospel to others. He is a champion who continually brings before our eyes our mission to the world. He helps lead the church in its efforts to reach the world for Christ. So he teaches, and mobilizes, and leads the church in its mission. Now certainly we understand this is not exclusively HIS role because we have an example of how Paul exhorts Timothy, who is the pastor of the church in Ephesus, to "*do the work of an evangelist.*" But the evangelist, nevertheless, has a significant role in these things.

Then we have pastors and teachers. Pastors are the shepherds of the flock who care for, and protect, and lead the church. Teachers instruct the church with God's Word, helping us to understand and apply it. And clearly, all pastors teach, but not all teachers are pastors.

As the Apostle Paul outlines the primary people God has given to His church for its equipping, we see the significant role of the pastor/teacher. The church needs a shepherd to care for and watch over it and it needs him to teach so that we are fed the Word of God and grow by it. These are the two primary responsibilities of any pastor.

Application-Now how do we apply these verses? Here is where I see the biblical application. As God's grace in giving us gifts is explained in verse 7 and these leaders are listed in verse 11 the clear connection and application is this: Such leaders are truly God's gifts of grace to His church. This is how God blesses His church. Leaders are vital to the protection and equipping and growth of the church. And so we do we believe that we truly need to be led? Do we see that God's grace for our lives is actually provided through the input of such leaders? And I include myself in this.

So much within us throws off authority, both the authority of God, and the authority of those in whom God has bestowed authority. And so in our day everything in our culture seems to oppose any need for leadership, and that has left an incredible vacuum in our lives.

Mark Dever in his book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* says, "It is a serious spiritual deficiency in a church either to have leaders who are untrustworthy or to have members who are incapable of trusting" (p.213). When we hear what God says about this matter, puts the obligation on both the church members and the church leaders. For example, in Hebrews 13:17 He says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Application-So this morning, I would simply ask this question, and it is for both you and me, "Do we recognize our need for leaders in our life, and how do we demonstrate this?" "Or has our contemporary culture so infected us that our independence is not simply a national freedom but is a personal way of life?"

### **B. The work of ministry done by the saints for the building up of the body**

Now this is the first step in Christ's plan to mature His church-the provision of godly leaders who equip us in God's Word. The next important step is the work of ministry done by the saints.

The gifts given to the church don't end with those who are called to equip and care for the church. They are also given to each of us so that along with the proper equipping of the church through its leaders, then the church is built up through the service of each member. This is the progression that we see in our text.

Paul underscores this later in verse 16 where he says, "*when each part is working properly*" (along with the sovereign work of Christ, these are what) "*make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*" Again, in 1 Corinthians 12:21, another text where the gifts of the church are in focus, we read, "*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the foot, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor.*"

One of great advances accomplished by Jesus Christ for His people under the new covenant according to 1 Peter 2:5 is that every believer is now like a priest. We are no longer separated from God. We no longer need a human mediator to draw near to God. The ministry now belongs to every one of us, and every one of us has been given gifts to do that ministry.

Application-So being engaged in the life of the church and using your gifts for the benefit of the church is a vital part of our growth. To think otherwise is to discount Christ's sovereign care in providing every gift He believes His church needs.

And if you think that you simply don't have what it takes to effectively use your gifts, please let me remind you of the very nature of your gift. It is the power and ability which God gives. So the ability does not come from you, it comes from Him. And now He is asking you to step out in obedience and faith and let Him use you for the good of His church.

And if there are some who think, "I am not even sure I know what my gift is," let me simply encourage you: As you see a need for ministry, go to the Lord with it, and ask Him how He might want to use you. And if you have a sense from Him that He wants you to serve, go for it. He'll confirm both to you and to others, what your gift is, because He does this through the humility of a heart that is simply wants to serve.