



Gifts for Growth

Kicking It Off

When you were a teenager, what group, team, or style did you most want to be known for being a part of?

Read

Ephesians 4:7-16

Summary

We all want two things that feel like a contradiction. We want to be seen as ourselves, unique and not reducible to some label, and we also want to belong to a group that knows us and claims us. Think about middle school, where you grabbed onto a tribe, a team, a style, and let it tell you who you were. There was comfort in belonging, but the second someone reduced you to it, you pushed back. That is not all of me. The strange answer is that you do not have to pick. In Christ you are both a unique individual and a full member of the body, and that is the only place the two finally hold together.

Here is where it starts, and it is not with you. It starts with Jesus winning. He came all the way down into our mess, beat sin and death, and went back up as the victorious King handing out gifts to His people. So your spiritual gifts are not weapons for a war you are still fighting. They are what the King passes out after the battle is already over. That takes all the anxiety out of it. You do not need more gifts than the person next to you. You just need to use what He measured out to you, and every bit of it is for one thing, building up the church and carrying His love into the world.

That means you are not in the audience. The leaders are not the only ministers, they are the coaches whose whole job is to get you off the bench and into the game. And because Christ already won, you can play freely. When you feel completely unequipped, you might be the best person for the job, because when it works you will know it was His grace and not you.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Paul could have opened the practical section of Ephesians with apostolic authority, but instead he introduced himself as a prisoner for the Lord. What circumstance in your life right now feels like a chain, and what would it change to see that chain as belonging to the Lord rather than to whatever is holding you?
3. The sermon described gentleness (prautes) as the posture of a warhorse under the rider's command: all of its strength present, none of it spent in panic or self-direction. In a situation where you feel most tempted to power up or prove yourself, what would it look like to bring your full strength while keeping it submitted to the Lord's direction?
4. Paul says the church's task is not to create unity but to guard what the Spirit has already made. In your relationships at home, at work, or in this church, where are you more often trying to build unity from scratch rather than protecting what God has already given?
5. The sermon contrasted the wolf pack (find your tribe, expel the weak, protect your own) with the church's call to bear one another's burdens. Who is the hardest person in your life to bear with right now, and what would it look like to bring them patience rather than a verdict?
6. The sermon ended with the image of Jesus as a lamb who gave Himself to His enemies rather than powering up. Where is the Lord calling you specifically to respond to opposition with that kind of gentleness this week, and what is making that hard?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"Spiritual gifting is not about winning a battle. It is an existence where the battle has already been won."

"Christ gave leaders to the church not to perform the ministry while everyone watches, but to equip every member so the body does the work and grows into maturity."

"I consider myself more like a little league coach, and I'm just trying to get everyone to get in the game. We're not playing for keeps, because Christ already won the game."

"I love you because Christ loves you. You are special, not because you say you're special or I say you're special, but because God loves you."

Sermon Notes***Ephesians 4:7-16***

7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 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.) 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, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Outline

1. One Christ, Grace to Each One (Eph. 4:7-10)

- a. Paul has just stacked seven "ones" and then turns on a dime to "each one of us" (v. 7); we are one, and we are each
- b. Grace is apportioned, measured out by Christ, not earned and not self-selected (v. 7)
- c. The world unites people around their uniqueness, and the bond breaks when we discover we are not as unique as the tribe required
- d. The gifts come down from a victory already won; the Christ who ascended first descended into our flesh and led a host of captives in His train (vv. 8-10, Psalm 68:18)

2. Gifts That Equip, Not Gifts We Watch (Eph. 4:11-13)

- a. Christ gives apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (v. 11), naming function, not a closed inventory
- b. The leaders equip the saints, and the work of ministry belongs to the saints (v. 12)
- c. Spectator Christianity gets the design backwards; every member is a worker and the leader's job is to get them ready
- d. The goal is corporate maturity, the whole body growing up together into the fullness of Christ (v. 13)

3. Grown Up Together, No Longer Tossed (Eph. 4:14-16)

- a. The immature church is tossed by every wind of doctrine because false unity has nothing fixed to hold it (v. 14)
- b. We grow by speaking the truth in love into Christ, who is the head (v. 15)
- c. Every joint supplies, every part works, and the growth runs from the Head through the members (v. 16)
- d. This is union that keeps our uniqueness; Christ joins distinct members and uses the difference itself to build us up

Notes

Most of us spend a long stretch of life trying to answer one question. Who am I? In middle school the question is loud, because that is the age when we start reaching for an identity and grabbing whatever is nearby. We attach ourselves to a group, a style, a team, a tribe, and we let the group tell us who we are. There is real comfort in that. To be known inside a community, to be one of the people who belong, settles something in us. But there is also a frustration that runs underneath it, because we do not want to be reduced to a label. We want to be understood as ourselves, unique and unrepeatable, and not flattened into a category that someone else assigns. A person hears, "you dress this way, so you must be that," or "you are from this place, so of course you love these things," and something in us pushes back. That is not all of me. Do not reduce me to the group.

So the tension sits there with two sides. One side says my identity is my uniqueness, that I am special and singular and made beautifully and wonderfully. The other side says my identity is my belonging, that I am held and named inside a community. The answer is both, and both of them are found in Christ. The church does not ask you to choose between being a unique individual and being part of the body. In Christ you are both at once, and that is the only place the two finally hold together.

This is exactly the turn Paul makes in Ephesians 4. He has just stacked seven "ones," one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, hammering the unity of the church. Then he pivots on a single phrase. "Grace was given to each one of us." One, and each. The grammar itself carries both truths. The grace is measured out, apportioned by Christ according to His gift, which means no member is left out and no member receives the whole. We share one life, and we each carry a distinct portion of it.

Before any of that becomes a question about my gifts or my role, it begins somewhere outside me. It begins with the victory of Christ. Paul reaches back to Psalm 68, a song about a king who ascends in triumph after winning the battle and setting his captives free. The One who ascended on high first descended, all the way down into our flesh and our condition, won the war over sin and death, and then climbed back above the heavens to fill all things. The gifts He hands out are the spoils of a battle already over. This reframes everything about how we think of spiritual gifts. They are not weapons for a fight whose outcome is still in doubt. They are what a victorious King distributes to His people after the victory has been secured. We do not use our gifts to win the war. We use them because the war is already won, and our task now is to announce it.

That changes the posture underneath the whole conversation. Too often we approach gifts the way we approach scarce resources, anxious to optimize, eager to have more than the person next to us, treating the Christian life like a game where we accumulate power. That instinct is not resting in the victory of Christ. It is a survival mentality dressed up in spiritual language, and it misreads the entire point. There is no equality of uniqueness, and there does not need to be. We all share equally in the one thing that matters most, the victory of Jesus over sin and death, and in that we are completely united. But the gifts themselves are diverse, handed out as Christ sees fit, because He knows each of us better than our community ever could. He knows your fears, your weaknesses, your strengths, and He equips you precisely for what He has called you to do. That is not division. It is diversity. A body where every part looked the same would not be a body at all.

And every gift points in one direction. The reason any of us receives the power of the Spirit is to love God and love others by building up the church. That is the whole of it. The gifts exist to proclaim what Jesus has already done, to grow His ministry, to make disciples, to carry His love into a dark and broken world. So when Paul lists the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, he is not handing out trophies for us to admire. He is describing leaders Christ gave to the church for a specific purpose, and that purpose is the hinge of the passage. The leaders exist to equip the saints for the work of ministry. The ministry belongs to the saints. The leaders get them ready.

This cuts hard against the way we are tempted to do church, where a few professionals do the spiritual work up front and everyone else sits back and evaluates the performance. That is not the design. You are not in the audience. You have a ministry, not because the church assigned it to you, but because Christ equipped you for it. The role of leadership is not to put you in a box, to license you for one narrow program and nothing else, but to ask a different question entirely. You are doing ministry. How can we equip you? The elders are given to anchor the church in the word, to draw people to Christ through Scripture and relationship. The deacons are given as the hands and feet, walking alongside you as you meet real needs in the name of the Lord. Neither office exists to do your ministry for you. They exist to train you and stand behind you while you do it.

A coach is the right picture. Not the kind who fields an elite team and watches them perform, but the little league coach whose whole joy is getting every kid into the game. The coach loves to play, and will gladly play if that is what is needed, but the design of the thing is to get everyone off the bench. And here is what frees the whole enterprise. We are not playing for keeps. The game is already won, the final score is settled, and we play out of joy rather than fear. The discouraged kid who says the other

player is bigger and faster and better, keep me on the bench, discovers something when he finally plays. He was not as bad as he feared, and more than that, it was fun. A church learning to play that way stops measuring itself by the wrong things, by budgets and buildings and numbers, and starts simply enjoying the work of loving the Lord and loving each other while everyone is invited in.

Paul names what is at stake if the body never grows into this. The immature church is tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, carried about by human cunning and crafty schemers. That instability is what false unity finally produces. A people grouped by sameness has nothing solid to hold them when the wind shifts. The alternative is to grow up by speaking the truth in love into Christ, who is the head. Truth and love are not rivals here. Truth without love deforms, love without truth dissolves, and the two together grow us up into the One who is our foundation. The church is the bride, called to love the bride because Christ loves her, but the object of our affection is never the church in itself and never ourselves. It is Christ alone. A life that makes itself the object of its own affection is not a healthy life, and a church that does the same will be swept away. Our eyes are fixed on the Bridegroom.

Growing up takes different things for different people, and this is where relationship matters more than any program. Some in the church are spiritual infants, and what they need is time, patience, and protection while they absorb and grow. You do not shake a sleeping baby and tell it to run a marathon. But some have been with Christ for years and are still drinking milk, and to them the same love speaks a firmer word. Wake up. It is time to work. The leaders cannot manufacture that growth, because they do not finally know what each person needs. The Spirit knows. So leadership speaks into your life not out of its own opinions but out of the word of God, relying on the Spirit to bring gentleness where gentleness is needed and steadiness where it is time to stand. Maturity is not about pointing at the leaders and saying that is their job. Maturity is learning to say, I get to do this. I get to minister, and when I feel insufficient, I have brothers and sisters and elders to lean on.

And if you feel completely unequipped, you may be the best candidate of all. When you are sure you cannot do it, and Christ puts you in the moment anyway and gives you the courage to build His kingdom, and it works, you will know it was not you. You will know it was His grace working through you. The growth we are after is not measured in seats filled or feelings stirred in a service. Ephesians tells us growth is measured in love. Why do I love you? Not because you are funny or smart or useful, though you may be all of those. The world loves people for what they offer and cuts off everyone else, and that meritocracy can never produce the grace the gospel asks for. The foundation of our love is that Christ loves you. You are special, not because you say so or

I say so, but because God set His affection on you. That is the love that holds a community together when every worldly bond has broken, and it is the love that lets us plant ourselves firmly in our identity in Christ, and Christ alone, even when the storms come.

Blog

Most of us know what it feels like to be blown around. A new idea sweeps through our circles and everyone seems to believe it by Friday. A confident voice online reframes something we thought we understood, and by the end of the week we are not sure what we think anymore. Paul has a picture for this. He says we can be "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (4:14). A small boat on a heaving sea, no anchor, at the mercy of whatever moves the water. That instability is the problem this passage means to solve, and the solution turns out to be the kind of unity the world cannot manufacture.

The world does try to hold us together. It just does it backwards. The common offer is that we should relate to one another by finding our similarities. Discover the people who are like you, gather around the things you share, and there you will belong. The strategy works for a while. The difficulty is that the bond is only as solid as the sameness underneath it, and sameness never holds. Sooner or later we find out we are not as alike as the group required us to be. The tribe that united around a shared style or a shared grievance or a shared taste discovers a crack, and the people who were one last year are tossed in different directions this year. A unity built on uniqueness cannot bear weight, because the moment our uniqueness shifts, the foundation shifts with it.

Paul offers a different foundation, and he sets it up with a striking turn. He has just finished stacking up the things that make the church one. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:4-6). Then, without pausing, he writes, "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (4:7). Notice how fast he moves from "one" to "each one." He is not nervous about that move, because in the gospel oneness and particularity are not rivals. We are united in Christ, and we remain ourselves. The same letter already showed us this when it took Jew and Gentile, two peoples who could not have been more different, and made them one new humanity without erasing either one (2:11-22). God does not unite us by sanding off the edges that make us distinct. He joins distinct members into a single body and then uses the differences to build us up.

Before Paul tells us what the gifts are, he tells us where they came from, and this anchors everything. He quotes a psalm about a victorious king ascending after battle, leading his captives and distributing the spoils, and he applies it to Christ: "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men" (4:8). Then he pauses on one word. If Scripture says Christ ascended, Paul reasons, it assumes that He first descended (4:9-10). The Christ who now hands out gifts from above is the same Christ who came all the way down to us. He took on our flesh. He entered our condition. He fought the battle we could not fight, led the powers that held us captive in His own

triumphal train, and rose above all the heavens so that He might fill all things. The gifts in our hands are the spoils of a victory He won by coming down. We did not generate them. He earned them and gave them away. That matters for the congregation I am preaching to, because it means our life together is never something we drum up by trying harder. It descends to us from a Lord who already won.

So what did the victorious Christ give? "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (4:11). We should be careful here, because this list gets misread in two directions. Some treat it as a closed inventory, the only gifts the Spirit gives, when Scripture elsewhere names a much wider range of giftings poured out on the church (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Peter 4). Paul is not fencing in the Spirit. He is naming the leaders Christ gave for a particular job, and that job is the heart of the whole passage. The leaders exist "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4:12). Read that sentence slowly, because the grammar carries the weight. The leaders equip. The saints do the work. The Greek word behind "equip" was used for mending a net or setting a bone, putting something back into working order so it can do what it was made to do. Pastors and teachers are not hired to do the ministry while the congregation watches and evaluates. They are given to get the whole body fit for the work, so that every member is a worker and no one is a spectator.

This is where many of us quietly resist, because we have been trained to attend church the way we attend a performance. We come, we receive, we assess whether it was good, and we leave. Christ designed something else entirely. He measured grace into every single one of us, which means He intends every single one of us to supply something the body needs. The point of a well-equipped church is not a more impressive platform. It is a congregation in which "each part is working properly" (4:16), where the growth runs through every joint and not just through a few professionals at the front.

And the goal is not personal polish. Paul says the equipping continues "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (4:13). He pictures the whole church as a single growing person, moving together toward the fullness of Christ. Maturity in this passage is a corporate thing. We grow up together, or we do not grow up at all. That is why he sets maturity directly against being "tossed to and fro." A church that has grown up into Christ is no longer at the mercy of every passing wind, not because its people are smarter, but because they are anchored to the same Head and built into the same body. The con artists Paul describes, working their "human cunning" and "craftiness in deceitful schemes" (4:14), have far less to grab onto when the church is mature and joined together. False teaching preys on isolated, immature believers. It struggles against a body that has grown up in love.

The means of that growth is worth saying plainly, because we often pit the two halves of it against each other. Paul says we grow "by speaking the truth in love" (4:15). Truth and love are not in tension here. They grow together, and they grow us up into Christ. Truth spoken without love deforms people, and we have all felt the sting of someone who was technically right and pastorally cruel. Love that refuses to speak the truth dissolves into sentiment and leaves people stuck. The church matures when its members tell one another the truth and do it tenderly, when correction comes wrapped in genuine care and care is honest enough to say the hard thing. That is how a body grows up into its Head.

Paul concludes the whole passage on an image of the body knit together: "from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (4:16). Every word of that fights against the sameness the world sells us. The body is "joined," which means the parts are different and that the difference is the point. A hand is not a foot, and the body needs both. The growth comes "from him," from Christ the Head, and it runs "through every joint," through the working of each distinct member. This is union that keeps our uniqueness. We are not asked to become copies of one another in order to belong. We are joined to Christ and to each other, and our differences become the very thing the Lord uses to make us grow.

This is the journey in front of us, to build ourselves up in love. The wind will keep blowing, and the tribes around us will keep offering belonging on the cheap, belonging that costs us nothing but our distinctness and gives us nothing solid in return. Christ offers something sturdier. He has measured His grace into every one of us. He gave us leaders to get us ready for the work, not to do it in our place. He means for every part to work, and He grows the whole body up into Himself. We do not have to be tossed, and we were never meant to watch. We are working parts of a body that is growing up into Christ, and the grace to do our part has already been given.