

The Gifts of Christ for the Good of His Church

Ephesians 4:7–16

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CONTEXT: Walking out our calling as brothers and sisters united together in Jesus Christ (4:1).¹

One of the things we learn in today's text: whenever God *calls* us to something, He also *equips* us for the calling.

- **Ex.** I'm currently building a chicken coop in my backyard, and I love having my boys work with me on projects like that. If I ask one of them to measure something, I'm going to hand them a measuring tape, or if I ask them to cut something, I'm going to make sure they have access to my saw. In other words, if I expect them to do something for me, I am going to give them whatever they need to get it done.
- If you a child of God, you have been giving the highest calling in universe, and the One who called you is faithful to give you everything you need to live out your calling for His glory.

That's the **theme** of our passage (*Eph 4:7–16*): *The gifts of Christ for the good of His church.*

1. **Q.** Who receives these gifts?
2. **Q.** Where do they come from?
3. **Q.** When were they given? ²
4. **Q.** What kinds of gifts does God give?
5. **Q.** What is their purpose?
6. **Application:** *How then shall we live?*

1. **Q.** Who receives the gifts of God? **A.** *Every child of God.*

Now to each one (ἐκάστῳ) of us *grace* was given according to the measure of Christ's *gift*.³
~ *Ephesians 4:7*

You remember the story in Genesis when Jacob gave his son Joseph a coat of many colors (*Gen 37:3*) and didn't give a gift to any of his other sons? I think that sometimes we can feel like the other brothers who got "passed over" by their Father when it came to gift-giving time. It's easy for us to look at the colorful gifts that other Christians possess and feel like our Father passed us by. We can look at other Christians and think, "*I wish I had their patience... I wish I had their wisdom... I wish I had their intellect... I wish I had their charisma... I wish I had their peace...*", but here's the thing: God doesn't pass by any of His children – ever. That's not the way it works in the family of God. In His grace, Christ Jesus has measured out gifts to "**each one**" in His family.

Paul says the same thing in his letter to the church in Corinth:

There are *diversities* of *gifts*, but the same Spirit...
One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one *individually* as He wills.
~ *1 Corinthians 12:4, 11*

We don't all have the exact same giftings, but we all have gifts.

Again, in his letter to the church Rome, he writes,

Having then *gifts differing* according to the *grace* that is give to us, let us use them...
~ *Romans 12:6*

- Q.** Which of God's children have spiritual gifts? **A.** *ἕκαστος*, each one.

¹ God has called us to walk together in unity by (1) walking in lowliness (*humility*), (2) walking in longsuffering (*patience*), and (3) walking in love (*selfless love*).

² In **Narnia**, the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve received gifts as a sign that the powers of darkness had crumbled.

³ See also **4:16**, "...the effective working by which every part (ἐκάστου) does its share..."

2. Q. **Where do these gifts come from?** A. *They come directly from Christ Jesus.*

Every spiritual gift comes from Christ and is given to us directly by Christ.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...
~ *Ephesians 4:11*

We are going to come back to this verse in a minute, but the thing I want you to focus on right now is the intensifying pronoun, “**Himself**”. If you’re using the ESV, you won’t see the emphasis here like you do if you’re looking at the NKJV. There is an extra word in the original language (**αὐτοῦς**) which highlights that Christ *Himself* is the One who gives us our gifts for the work to which He has called us. He doesn’t delegate this responsibility to an angel or a pastor or something. He doesn’t give you a gift card and tell you to pick out your own gift: “*I didn’t know what to get you, so I got you a gift card for the spiritual gift store and thought you could just go pick out whichever one looks fun to you.*” He doesn’t choose a gift for you and then ship it through a mail delivery service.

Jesus is actively, personally, and sovereignly involved in giving us the perfect gifts for our unique place in His body. He knows you. He knows you so much better than you know yourself. The gifts that He gives aren’t generic, cookie-cutter, mass-produced, run-of-the-mill, one-size-fits-all gifts. The gifts He gives are exactly perfect for the call He has given to you within the local church. He has given them to you *Himself*.

First Christmas: On our first Christmas as a married couple, Liz put a ton of time into the gifts that she made for me. They revealed that she knew me, that she had thought about me. They were one-of-a-kind with my name on it (personally-made blanket, personally-made photo album, personally-made calendar...). **What did I get her?** *A 12-pack of soda and a box of Cheez-It crackers.* Jesus doesn’t give gifts like Jeremiah! My gifts were cold and impersonal; when Jesus gives gifts, it has your name and His fingerprints all over it.

Q. Where do these gifts come from? A. **αὐτοῦς**, they come from Christ *Himself*.

3. Q. **When were these gifts given to us?** A. *When Jesus conquered the grave and ascended to His Father’s throne in glory.*

Therefore He says:

“When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.”

~ *Ephesians 4:8*

When Paul says this, he is quoting from a translation of **Psalm 68:18** to describe the victory of Christ over the enemy (*sin, death, grave, hell*). Paul just assumes that his audience knows this passage he is quoting because He doesn’t clarify the source.⁴ I think this is an indication of just how much the early church used the Psalms in their Sunday gatherings. He points to this military psalm that they know well to say, “*This is what Jesus did! He ascended on high as the champion of the cross. In His triumphal procession, He displayed His victory over the sin and shame that held your soul captive in darkness.*”⁵ *He made a public spectacle of them.*⁶ (*Captivity itself was now the captive of Jesus Christ. Just like the power of death was put to death; spiritual captivity was taken captive in the victory of Christ Jesus.*) *And then, as the conquering King, He gave spiritual gifts to His people”* (which we read about in **Acts 2**).

⁴ **ESV:** “*It says...*” **CEB:** “*Scripture says...*” **NKJV:** “*He says...*” The word Paul uses (λέγει) can have any of these words as its subject, and they are all true. As **Scripture** declares truth, **it** is declaring God’s truth for **He** is the divine author (2 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:1).

⁵ 2 Cor 2:14.

⁶ Col 2:15.

One of the things we see in a picture like this is that there are no bystanders in the Kingdom of Christ. There are victors and there are captives. You will either celebrate His victory for all eternity, or you will gnash your teeth for all eternity. Nobody will be standing on the sideline saying, “*Meh!*” Nobody will be shrugging shoulders. Nobody will be giving golf claps. There is no audience when it comes to the kingdom of Christ Jesus. There are victors and captives, that’s it.

Paul continues...

Now this, “*He ascended*”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also *the One who ascended far above all* the heavens, that He might fill all things.
~ *Ephesians 4:9–10*

Paul has already used this kind of victory language earlier in this letter (in **chapter 1**) when He speaks of Christ taking His throne “*in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come*” (**1:20–21**) and how “*all things*” have been “*put...under His feet*” (**1:22**).

Bible scholars debate what Paul means when he says that Jesus “*descended into the lower parts of the earth*”:

- The incarnation of Christ (*from Heaven to Earth*) ...
- The death of Christ (*from life down into the grave*) ...
- The sending of the Holy Spirit (*down into the depths of our heart*) ...

Regardless of what Paul means by this exegetical interpretation, his point remains the same: *Jesus went low for us*. His entire life was a picture of God descending for the sake of lifting you up to Himself:

- *Jesus left the glory of paradise to come to earth as a helpless baby.*
- *He was born in the outback town of Bethlehem.*
- *Raised in the no-name town of Nazareth.*
- *Spent His ministry with fishermen and tax collectors.*
- *Touched the eyes of the blind and the skin of lepers.*
- *Dressed like a servant and washed His disciples’ dirty feet.*
- *Was stripped, beaten, and crucified outside the city walls like a criminal.*
- *His body was sealed in a cold, dark, silent tomb – alone.*
- *And in the darkness of death, He went even lower still.*⁷

The exalted God of the universe descended into the deepest depths in order to lift you up to Himself.

And then, as is the right of the One who conquers the enemy, He gives gifts to His people.

4. Q. What is the nature of these gifts?

Paul often wrote about spiritual gifts. He talks about the diversity of spiritual gifts in his letter to the church in Corinth (**Cor 12**). He wrote about different kinds of gifts in his letter to the church in Rome (**Rom 12**). He lists gifts like the gift of healing, prophecy, hospitality, words of wisdom, words of knowledge... But here in his letter to the churches in Ephesus, Paul lists a different kind of gift: *people*. He’s not focused primarily on the gift of abilities but on *the gift of community and spiritual leadership within the local church*.

⁷ See **the Apostle’s Creed** (“*descended into hell*”); c.f., Eph 4:9; Acts 2:24; 1 Pet 3:19; Hos 13:14.

And He Himself *gave* some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...

~ *Ephesians 4:11–12*

We could spend time talking about each of these gifts individually, but the main thing I want us to see is what these gifts are – and that is...*people*. This is one of the reasons why it's so important for you to commit your life to a local church. I sometimes hear people say, "I'm good with God, but I'm done with the church." Brothers and sisters, it doesn't work that way. To walk away from the local church is like trying to live out the calling that God has given you without any of the tools for the journey. Nowhere in the NT do we see God calling Christians into isolation. Everywhere, He is calling them into covenant community because this is the context in which He gives gifts for the journey. *Teachers. Pastors. Evangelists.* God's gift to you is a community of people who are gifted at equipping you for the work of ministry and for building you up in the body of Christ.⁸

5. Q. What is the purpose of these gifts?

A. For equipping the saints for the work of ministry (4:12).

- God's gifts are **not primarily** intended to make your life more comfortable (*like a fancy car or a better paying job*). His gifts are meant to equip you in the kingdom work to which he has called you. Ultimately, this is true for every gift God has ever given you. The Bible tells us that "every good and perfect gift" comes from God (*James 1:17*). He gives to all people "life, breath, and all things" (*Acts 17:25*), and Paul says that "whatever you do" is to be done the glory God in view (*1 Cor 10:31*). Every gift God gives is good (*spiritual abilities, covenant community, material possessions*), and He means for you to invest it into the kingdom work to which He has called you.

- *Are you healthy?* How are you seeking to use your health for the glory of God?
- *Are you sick?* How are you seeking to use your sickness for the glory of God?
- *Are you wealthy?* What are you doing with your wealth?
- *Are you poor?* How are you using your poverty?
- *How are you seeking to use God's gifts for His glory in the local church?*

B. For the building up (edifying) of the body of Christ (4:12).

- These gifts of grace are **not primarily** for our exclusive enjoyment (*e.g., candy bar*); rather, the gifts that God has given you are for the benefit of the entire church.⁹

"The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all..."

~ *1 Corinthians 12:7*

"Let all things be done for edification..."

~ *1 Corinthians 14:21*

The **purpose** of the gifts that God gives is so that the body of Christ (*the church*) might be built up. One of the things that happens when you get **built up** in the faith is that you also **grow up** in the faith. Your heart and your mind begin to mature. Your sinful immaturity begins to be replaced with a spiritual depth and emotional growth. You more you get filled up with Christ (**4:13**), the more your life begins to reflect Christ.

⁸ God's good gift in your life is to give you people who will lead you, teach you, shepherd you, care for you, minister the Word of God to you. This ought to significantly shape the way we view those who have a role of spiritual leadership in our lives (*e.g., Sunday School teachers, small group leaders, elders, pastors*). This isn't an occupation or a profession; it is a divine gifting for your good. Your spiritual leaders are a good gift from Jesus to you for the sake of building you up. They aren't merely voted on by a church. They aren't merely appointed by the elders. They aren't merely ordained by a denominational committee.

⁹ **Example:** blender, vacuum... gifts that are intended to be used for the benefit of all.

Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, **to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;** that we should **no longer be children**, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may **grow up in all things into Him** who is the head—Christ— from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, ¹⁰ according to the **effective working** by which every part does its share, causes **growth of the body** for the **edifying of itself** in love.¹¹

~ *Ephesians 4:13–16*

Everybody receives gift for the sake of building up the body of Christ, which means that if you aren't involved in a ministry of some kind within your local church, you are squandering the gift that God has given you. You are wasting God's gift. If that sounds harsh, it's not nearly as harsh as what Jesus said in His parable of the talents (*Matt 25*). The Master gave gifts (talents, resources) to His servants that He expected them to steward for the sake of His kingdom while He was away. And when He returned, He discovered that one of the servants had buried his gift in the sand. He didn't use it. He didn't invest it. It remained untouched. In this story, the Master called his servant "wicked" (*25:26*) and had him cast into out darkness (*25:30*).

- God doesn't give *selfish* gifts.
- He doesn't give *useless* gifts.
- He doesn't give *dormant* gifts.
- He doesn't give *second-class* gifts.
- He doesn't give *lesser* gifts.

He gives *good* gifts. He gives *different* gifts. He gives gifts *to everyone*. And He expects us to exercise those gifts for the sake of building up one another as the body of Christ so that we are most effective in our God-given task of taking the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth and thus being the means by which God fills the earth with His glory like waters cover the sea (*Hab 2:14*).

CLOSING

In the North Center **Membership Covenant**, one of the things that every single member affirms is that we *will seek to discover our gifts* ... and that we will exercise those gifts in building up the body of Christ.

Q. How do we do that? How do we discover the gifts that Jesus has given to us?

1. **PRAY.** Ask God to give you gifts for His kingdom, and ask Him reveal those gifts to you (**1 Cor 14:1**).
2. **CONNECT.** One of the ways we discover our gifts is by spending quality time with the body of Christ. Not only do we begin to experience the unique ways that God has gift us, but the more that others in church get to know you, the more they can speak into your life and identify the unique ways that God has gifted you. If your only connection to the local church is a Sunday worship service one day a week, it is not possible for people to truly get to know you or for you to discover your God-given gifts.
3. **EXPERIMENT.** You may never know that God has gifted you in a particular way until you try something new. Experiment. Speak a word of encouragement over somebody and see what happens! Show hospitality by inviting somebody over for a meal. Go on a mission trip. Get involved in a ministry. Invite your neighbor or your coworkers to join you at one of our Sunday gatherings. What is one area of growth that you see at your local church? If God has opened your eyes to see a need in the local church, He has probably also given you a gift to meet that need. But you'll never know unless you try.

¹⁰ Bobby members died when they are severed from the body. Somebody shared a statistic with me this past week stating that somewhere around 40 million have walked away from the church in the US in recent years. When you compare this number with the spike in depression, suicide rates, divorce rates, sexual confusion, identity crisis, it's not hard to see the correlation. Christians die when they are severed from the local church.

¹¹ Why should we long to see growth in the body of Christ? (1) It is fitting for Christ to have a healthy body; and (2) a healthy body makes for healthy members – thus, it's good for you.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

One of the reasons God gives us spiritual gifts is to equip us to **fill the world with glorious presence of King Jesus** (4:13).

Paul uses the language of “fullness” all over this letter (i.e., 1:23; 3:19; 4:10, 13). The fullness of God is on display within the gathered community of God’s people: *the local church*.

- In the church (through our unity in the midst of diversity), we see His love, His patience, His wisdom, His mercy, the gifts of His Spirit.
- Through the church, God is filling the world with the glory of His presence.
- The church is the display of Christ’s fullness, and the church is the body of Christ through which He is exercising His rule and reign across the entire earth.
 - We are kings and priests.
 - All power and all authority in heaven and on earth belong to Jesus.
 - We are joint heirs of all that belongs to Christ.
 - The glory of God will cover the earth like waters cover the sea. God means to fill the earth with His glory, and the church is the means by which He will accomplish this.
 - But look at the news pastor. Our world is going to hell in a handbasket.
 - The church is growing like never before all over the globe, and in America, the church is experiencing a refining like it never has before in our country.
 - But look at all the people who are walking away...
 - Do you remember what the Bible says, those who walk away only prove that they were never really part of the church to begin with.
- Christ Jesus means to fill this world with His presence, and He means to use His body (the church) to do it. And to that end, He has given each of us gifts so that we might build one another up in the work that God has given us to do.