



Ephesians 4:7-16 Pt 1 **God's Gifts to the Church**

We turned a corner in the book of Ephesians when we entered chapter four. We noted that this book, like the rest of Paul's writing, follows a very clear and predictable pattern – first it tells us about God, it points out all He has done for us, who He is, what salvation is all about, in other words, it gives us things to believe. And then, after we have our doctrine straightened out, we are told of the deeds we should undertake. But it's always this way, theology precedes our to-do list.

And that's important to know because as you read the Bible you learn that God has a plan for your life. He has, as we've read in Ephesians 2, prepared good works beforehand that you should walk in them. He has specific things He wants to see happen in your life. He has specific things He wants you to do. Whether you know it or not, He actually has specific ministry that He wants you to be involved in.

That could take a lot of different forms, it could happen in a lot of different places. It doesn't mean that God has called all of you to be pastors, though He has called some of you. I am certain we have pastors seated here among us, young boys, or men, even men that might think they're too old for that kind of thing – God has prepared good works for you in advance that you might walk in them and for some of you that means taking up the title of pastor and laying down your life for the sake of the ministry. And we have young ladies, married women, and widows that God is also calling into some form of ministry. Don't resist, don't be afraid, submit and follow Him and watch where He leads you.

Because no matter who you are, male or female, young or old, single or married, no matter what your life history or circumstance, if God has transformed you, He has also called you into some form of ministry. He has some way that He wants to use you to carry out His purposes and represent Him to the rest of the world. And he has placed people in the church to prepare you for that ministry and to stand with you in it. So be open to what God wants to speak to you this morning, be open to hearing what He wants to say because we're going to look at the Scriptures together and you've got to come to grips with what these things mean and how they might impact your life.

So let's read together. We pick up where we left off last week with Paul beseeching us to walk worth of our calling, which includes a life characterized by peace and unity in our relationships with other Christians. And now he says:

Eph 4:7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Did you notice that? **"To each one of us grace was given."**

What is the grace that you have received? What is the impact God has had and wants to continue having on your life? If you are one of us – if you are a Christian, one who is accepted in the Beloved, grace has been given to you. Now, for some of you that will manifest itself in a call to what you would traditionally think of as “ministry” as we’re about to see, but no matter what form it takes, the statement is still true: **to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.** And it’s a point worth beating to death – “each of us” means all of us – even the scarred and the broken have been given a gift of ministry by Christ, because our ministry is not based on achievement or merit, it’s by grace, not strength – we receive it as a gift from our God.

8 Therefore He says:

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

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

OK, what does that mean? Well, we could take all morning trying to break this apart and figure it out, but let me give you the short version: we don’t really know with 100% certainty.

Ultimately, the point is this: Christ has been victorious and given gifts to us. Paul is using the idea of a military conqueror returning home victoriously and distributing some of the things he has captured as gifts. In more domestic terms it’s the ritual that plays out every time you go away on business or vacation and bring back a treat for someone you love.

But if you’re wondering who the captives were that He led captive, or what it means that He first descended - well, there are several possible interpretations for that. It could refer to a descent from Heaven to earth or from earth to the grave. You’ve got smart people who interpret it each way.¹ The important point is that Christ has been victorious and as a result has generously given us gifts. The Bible contains several lists of gifts that we receive from God, but Paul had a few specific things in mind here:

11 And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

Those are the gifts, there could be four of them or five – the grammar of the original Greek would permit you to say pastors and teachers are separate or to say they’re pastors that teach, either one, but these are the gifts Christ has given to the church.

¹ Leon Morris does a good job outlining the various positions on possible interpretations of this verse, i.e. who/what are the captives; see *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* pp 123-124 for greater detail.

And now here is the reason, here is why we have these people:

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 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;

In other words, just like a human body grows and develops over time, we're supposed to be growing and maturing as the body of Christ –

14 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, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

This analogy is a common one in the Bible – comparing the church, the Body of Christ, to an actual body. Individual Christians are different parts of the body, and coming together we form the whole. Well, that body, like all normal, healthy, developing bodies, is supposed to grow. So, if you're taking notes, you might want to write this down: Maturity is the goal, Ministry is the method. God is calling us, all of us, into ministry that both reflects and fosters our maturity.

And to facilitate the process God has appointed certain people: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers or, pastors and teachers. Again, the Greek grammar could be taken either way, though most people take it as pastor-teachers. Regardless of how you parse it though, each of these ministerial offices shares a common focus of spreading and repeating Christ's message, and each of them is grounded in a calling and enabling that comes from Christ.

Now, that's very important, so let's zoom in on it: the authority of the people holding these titles is located in their message and in their calling. And in both cases, the authority comes from God, not the man: "He, Himself gave some to be." We joke about someone thinking they're God's gift to women, but the Bible clearly teaches that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are God's gift to the church.

That's a heavy statement, so let's give it some boundaries by noting that when a gift is given, the focus is never intended to be on the gift by itself. The focus is on the giver or on the receiver, but the gift is just a tool that is used to bless the recipient. So let's stay together in our understanding. The gift should never boast in itself or point to itself. The gift is not the point, it's a tool, a token, used by the giver to accomplish something else – to demonstrate love or provide assistance or be a blessing. And that's exactly why God has given these gifts to the church. We will notice that when we take a look at each of them in

order – the blessing is not the man, his personality, his charisma, it’s the message He brings, the function he fills.

The first gift we see mentioned is the gift of Apostles. It’s based on the Greek word *Apostolos* – a commissioned messenger. Back in the days before Wi-fi and texting, before telephones and telegraphs, before the mail service, if you wanted a message carried from one place to another you relied on a runner - an individual you granted the authority to bring your message to someone else.

The most famous apostles are the original twelve of course, though Judas fell away. There were more than just the twelve though - James, Paul, Barnabas, Silas², and others are referred to as apostles – men sent out by God with a message. Most of these men were foundational to the establishment of the Christian church and that is why apostles are listed first. They were used in a special way for a special purpose and there are no more apostles like them. You could almost think of them like the five star admirals and generals we had during WWII. We still have generals and admirals today, but no one is serving in that five-star capacity.

We could, in theory, refer to some people today as apostles, but they would be people that God used in an extraordinary manner to further His kingdom. Easy names to grab would be people like William Carey who sparked the modern missions movement by taking the gospel to India. Hudson Taylor who spent his entire life loving China for Jesus Christ. And Adoniram Judson who served in a similar capacity in Burma. There can be no doubt that these men were called and used by God in an unusually powerful and influential manner for the kingdom. But in general, apostles are rare and used by God in establishing new works on a large scale.

The second calling on our list is Prophets. These are spokesmen for God. Their role is obvious in the Old Testament where they were often found writing or speaking “thus saith the LORD.” Prophets received direct revelation from God and recorded it for all time. God would reveal His plans to them in advance and they would fore-tell the future. No one can claim this kind of authoritative prophetic role today. No one today can say “thus saith the Lord” unless they directly follow it with Scripture. No one is receiving fresh or new Scripture for us today, and the entire Christian church in all its flavors, agrees on this.

But there was another function of prophets and that was declaring God’s word to people, telling or re-telling the truth about God and His plans in the world, in a way that was NOT recorded as Scripture. Some people like to make the distinction here between fore-telling and forth-telling Word of God. This forth-telling function continued to exist into the New Testament times and it would seem that it is even available today.

You see an example of this forth-telling ministry in

² See Gal 1:19; Acts 14:14; 1 Thes 2:6; Rom 16:7

Acts 15:32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

And, interestingly, it's obvious some ladies were given this gift because we're told in Acts 21 that when Paul came to Caesarea he stayed at the home of an evangelist named Philip and

Acts 21:9 ... this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

But what exactly does that mean? Once again, we don't really know. New Testament scholars say things like, "it is [hard] for us to see their particular ministry."³ And, "exactly what [NT prophets] did is nowhere spelled out for us."⁴ While another admits, "we do not know for certain what [NT prophecy] is."⁵

But think about this: when we see the gift of prophecy in the Scripture we most often see it occur on a national scale. The prophet is someone with a message or voice that is widely heard through the culture or that speaks to significant leaders.

If we were to say someone was serving in a prophetic way in modern times we would be talking about someone with a powerful or extremely timely insight regarding the application of Scripture to modern issues. If I were to think of people who had or have a prophetic voice in recent times, (note I didn't say they ARE prophets, but people who speak with a prophetic voice), it would be people like CS Lewis during the 1940s with His famous book *Mere Christianity*. Lewis drew people together around the core of the Christian faith while the whole world seemed to be at war.

Francis Schaeffer came along in the 1970s and may have had a prophetic voice as he spoke about the shifting sands of Western culture. I read his collected works a few years ago and could hardly believe he was writing decades ago about issues we are facing right now. It's almost as though God gave him insight to see what we would need to respond to the issues of culture today. In fact, much of our modern cultural apologetics is grounded in things Schaeffer was expressing decades ago. Perhaps he was a prophetic voice sent to us as a gift.

But here's something very important to keep in mind. He didn't go around introducing himself as a prophet. They didn't have big rallies saying come hear the prophet speak. No. But here's why we should take notice – long after he is dead and gone, the church continues to say, that man had a special ministry. An enduring ministry. A helpful ministry in guiding us to think Biblically about emerging social and cultural issues. Maybe he was functioning prophetically.

But in another sense, does it really matter what we call it? Because the most important thing is that he was saved. His soul was safe in Jesus. At the end of the day, that's what

³ Foulkes, 118

⁴ Morris, 126

⁵ Stott, 162

really matters – are you secure in Jesus and are you obedient to Him, regardless of what He calls you to do? You don't need a title to serve and no one should need a special title to serve you.

And let me make another point here: I know most of the examples I've been citing are dead white men. But God doesn't see them that way – God is not a demographer. He sees through their skin color and their cultural bias and sees the heart. So if you're sitting in here and you're not white, or a man, or dead – I want you to know God can use you too. In fact, you're probably better suited than others to reach whoever God wants to reach next.

Which brings us to the next gift, Evangelists. An evangelist is someone who proclaims the gospel. It's a word that morphs out of the original Greek word for the gospel – the *euangelion*. Do we have evangelists today, people who proclaim the need for repentance, and the free gift of forgiveness of sin found in Jesus Christ? Absolutely! If you want to think in terms of an evangelist with a profound impact on the entire church, what's the name that pops into everyone's head? In modern times, it's Billy Graham of course. And men like Moody and Whitfield, Finney and Billy Sunday, in the 18th and 19th centuries - men whose names were synonymous with gospel proclamation.

And yet, we all have a particular obligation to share our faith – to tell people there is a God, He created the world and everything in it, and that we have sinned against Him and we face a judgment for that disobedience and rebellion even if we say we don't know Him. A cop will give me a ticket for speeding even if I say I didn't know the speed limit. But here's the difference, God knows I can't pay the fine on my own, so He offers to pay it for me. That's what Jesus was accomplishing on the cross. He wants me to know that I have done wrong, and to agree, but then to let Him pay the fine. That's the good news, that's the gospel, that's the kind of thing an evangelist shares. And we all have an obligation to do that.

But there is no doubt; some people are especially gifted in this. They have a particular giftedness in personal evangelism – whether in one on one conversation or in communicating to groups, there are some who are particularly burdened for the lost and seem uniquely gifted to communicate the gospel. We need to be praying that God would give this gift, this calling, to more and more people. And not just people we would know by the title of evangelist but people we would know by the title mechanic, lawyer, coach, nurse, teacher, Staff Sergeant, men and women scattered throughout the community with a heart for the lost and the God-given ability to reach them.

Now again, that will never remove our own obligation to personally share with the people we know, but the reality is, people are headed for eternal judgment and they need to hear the good news. God is worthy to receive their praise.

That brings us to the next gift God has given the church and that is pastors, or as I believe, pastor-teachers. In the original language “pastor” literally means a shepherd, they oversee a local congregation and are called to teach God's Word to the local body. Apostles, prophets, and evangelists belong to universal Church - their work advances the kingdom of

God on a large scale. But the work of the pastor is much more focused; he belongs to the local body and daily life.

And this is where the teaching role comes in. All pastors should be teachers, but not all teachers are pastors. Week in and week out the faithful shepherd should be teaching the people the Word of God, expounding the Scriptures. Reminding the people of things they already know and helping them understand the things they haven't discovered yet. In fact, if you know of a pastor whose church you don't attend, it's often through his teaching ministry – you heard him on the radio or podcast or saw a video or a read something he wrote. The teaching ministry is the pastor's most prominent and enduring ministry.

And since I have the floor, may I take a moment to advocate for my deeply held conviction that the best way to fulfill that ministry is by taking on whole books of the Bible. Beginning with chapter one, verse one and moving through the whole book. Because I believe this approach is self-calibrating. I believe it is quite nearly impossible for a church that is committed to going through the entire Bible, verse by verse, it is impossible for that church to drift into any kind of serious doctrinal error. Because if the leadership or the people begin to drift from any core aspect of doctrine, it won't be long before their commitment to teaching full books, and all the books, of the Bible brings them to a passage that corrects any drift. There is not a single cult out there that emphasizes teaching through the Word of God verse by verse.

So wherever you find yourself next Sunday or next year can I beg you to please, please, please, try to find a church that teaches through whole books of the Bible as the regular pattern of their Sunday morning worship? There's nothing wrong with a topical sermon or even a short series here and there, but let the church move forward by a whole-hearted commitment to teaching whole books from the whole Bible. Because this is what God has given us to guide us in our personal lives and churches that follow this pattern produce healthy Christians.

OK, enough of the shameless plug - we have to move along.

So we have these gifts – roles, positions, offices, given by God to the church, but why? Why were the gifts given? So people could wear funny clothes or have fancy titles? So we could have special church people who do special church things while everyone else just looks on? No. These gifts are given to the church by the Lord of the church for the benefit of the people in the church:

Eph 4:12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

That's two ways of saying the same thing – the church has pastors today so that the people will be equipped for ministry and edified, that's a fancy way of saying built up, mature, grow up.

So, as your pastor, here's part of my job description.

And we need to seriously ask the question – if The City Gates Church is your home – are you growing in your ministry service? Are you maturing in the faith? Are you the same person you were a year and a half ago or how ever long ago you joined us? Are you stagnant? Plateaued? Sliding backward? Or are you moving forward, growing, stepping out? Do you know the ministry that God has called you to? Do you feel equipped for it?

Would you say that Stephen, Matt, or I have been a blessing to you in any way? Are you getting the equipping you need?

Growth is normative for healthy Christians. And if you're not growing, if you're not being equipped, let's be blunt – that means either we're not doing our God-given job, or you're not responding. But it's one or the other and either way, we need to face it.

Because you've been given a ministry – and we're supposed to be equipping you for it. If it's not happening in your life, we're both going to be held accountable. Remember, Christ does not just save us *from* sin, He saves us *for* service.

That service could take all kinds of forms, it could occur in all sorts of locations. But you cannot contain Christ. If He is in you, He also wants to come out through you. He wants you to be His hands and feet, His heart and mouth. He wants you to be His tool for touching the lives of others and changing things in this world. He wants to build you up and perfect you at the level of your soul and allow that growth to radiate outward into all the other areas of life. And one of the ways He wants to do all of that is here, in the local church, through your God-given pastors. So, how are we doing? Are you being equipped, are you growing?

I'll leave you with that question this morning, something to chew on and consider and we will return to this passage next week to look at what ministry is, what is this thing you're called to and being equipped for, and we'll also look at how we mutually benefit when we individually grow in our ministry calling. But take time this week and ask God – what ministry is He calling you to? In light of all your particular circumstances, what is ministry supposed to look like right now, and what does God want to do next, and is your church equipping you for that?

Are you being edified, built up in your relationship with God? Can you look back and point to evidence of *recent* growth and maturity, or are you stagnant? Plateaued? When was the last time you really saw growth? Are you satisfied with your present condition, or do you want more? Are you still spiritually hungry? Do you taste and see that the Lord is good? Or are you in a rut, a rhythm, just keeping up habits you established long ago?

That's not what God has for you. That's not why you're here. He wants you to grow, He wants you to minister and He wants to minister to you. So listen to Him. Take some time this week and pray, ask God what He wants to do, and then let's come together again next week and receive from His Word together.

Let's pray.