

SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 4:7-16	DATE	10.20.19
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LESSON SUMMARY	All Christians are gifted for ministry. Church leaders have the special ministry of equipping church members for their own ministries. When this happens, the church matures.		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸This is why it says:

**“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”**

⁹(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

In vv 1-6 of chapter 4, Paul issued a call to unity. Now he moves to a discussion of individuality in the church. Importantly, the individuality Paul addresses here is not a matter of personality or ancestry, though they are surely at play in the church. Rather, he is speaking of spiritual gifts that each Christian has been given. This is what Paul means when he speaks of “grace” that Christ has given to his people. In this first section of the passage, Paul focuses on the Jesus story to explain how this has taken place.

The quotation in v 8 comes from Psalm 68:18, “which refers to God as the Divine Warrior who achieves a great victory over his enemies and ascends his holy mountain.”¹ Paul takes this God-hymn and applies it directly to Christ. In doing so, he offers an OT underpinning for the idea of Jesus distributing gifts, or graces, to his people. In this line of thought, spiritual gifts are given as part of Christ’s victory procession. As the conqueror who leads his captives (probably the principalities and powers that show up elsewhere in Ephesians), Jesus generously showers gifts on his people. These are the graces Paul has already spoken of.

Vv 9-10 are a kind of parenthesis to Paul’s main point that builds on the idea of Christ’s ascension. As Klyne Snodgrass explains, everything depends on how we understand the literal Greek, which says Jesus “descended to the lower regions of the earth.”² Does this mean that Jesus descended to regions below the earth, i.e. Hades in first century thought, or that he descended to the lower regions that make up the earth? The Hades interpretation doesn’t have much support in the NT, except possibly in 1 Peter 3:19. However, that passage is a bit of an enigma itself. For my part, I take the second interpretation, as does the NIV. The idea is that in the incarnation Jesus descended to walk the earth in human form and then ascended victorious after the resurrection. Whichever interpretation you go with, it is important not to get too hung up on it. After all, this is a parenthesis to Paul’s main point. The big deal is that Jesus wins and gives gifts to his people. Both interpretations end up there, though I do think the second has more to commend it.

¹ Arnold, C. E. (2010). [Ephesians](#) (p. 246). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² Snodgrass, 302.

The last part of the parenthesis about Christ ascending “to fill the whole universe” can be a bit confusing. Snodgrass is once again helpful:

The NIV translation “in order to fill the whole universe” may mislead in that it creates spatial ideas. The text says literally, “in order that he may fill all things.” Whenever Paul mentions the ascension, he emphasizes Christ’s authority and the fact that Christ encompasses all things and places them in their proper role. Nothing is outside his jurisdiction or excluded from the benefit and wholeness he brings.³

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

We might now expect Paul to talk about spiritual gifts in general as he does in Rom 8 and 1 Cor 12. Instead, Paul talks about a specific gift set: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers. These gifts, it seems, set Christians apart for leadership in the church. More than that, as the passage unfolds it becomes clear that Paul is referring not only to the gifts themselves but also to the recipients. The idea is that Christ gifted some believers to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers *and then gave those believers to the church*. In one sense, this language is unremarkable because all Christians are ultimately gifted by Jesus to the church. That’s the whole reason all believers receive spiritual gifts. Everyone has a part to play! In another sense, Christians with these gifts are given to the church for a special leadership function, and that is Paul’s focus here. Christ himself endowed church leaders and then gifted them to the church for a reason.

Before we move on to the reason Christ gave these various leaders to the church, it will be helpful to first discuss each leader’s role.

- *Apostles* were the foremost authority figures in the church. The original twelve apostles were chosen by Jesus to be with him and extend his ministry (see Mark 3:14). After Judas fell away, Matthias, who had followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, was chosen through prayer and casting lots to replace him in the apostles’ ranks (see Acts 2:15-26). Naturally, these apostles, most of whom had been chosen by Jesus himself during his ministry, became the leaders of the early church. Eventually, this apostolic authority was shared with others, who also came to be known as apostles.
- *Prophets* were those who made the will of God apparent in the church’s midst. As Snodgrass explains, “At times prophets predicted future events (Acts 11:27–28; 21:10), but usually they explained the relevance of the gospel and the will of God (see 1 Cor. 14:3–40).”⁴
- *Evangelists*, like Timothy (see 2 Tim 4:5), presented the gospel to unbelievers. We might think of them a bit like local missionaries today.
- *Pastor/Teachers* cared for local congregations, especially through the ministry of teaching.

So, why exactly did Jesus give these leaders to the church? To equip the members of the church for works of service and building up the body of Christ. Here it is important to go with newer translations like the NIV,

³ Snodgrass, 305.

⁴ Snodgrass, 307.

ESV, NASB, or NKJV. I say this because the King James Version offers a slightly different translation that makes a big difference in the way we understand how the church works. Notice how the KJV and NKJV differ in their translations of v 12:

- KJV: For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...
- NKJV: for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...

The wording is by and large the same, but the commas are different. For the KJV, church leaders were given to the church for three reasons: (1) to perfect the saints, (2) for the work of ministry, and (3) for edifying the body of Christ. For the NKJV and other newer translations, church leaders were given for one purpose with two results. They are (1) to equip the saints (a) for the work of ministry and (b) for the edifying (or building up) of the body of Christ. That's a pretty big difference! The KJV has church leaders doing all the work and building up, while the newer translations have the church leaders equipping church members to do the work and build up. In light of the larger NT witness, in which all Christians are gifted for ministry, the newer take on the passage is to be preferred. Church leaders have been given by Christ to the church to prepare his people for ministry mutual support.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Here in vv 14-16 we have a picture of what things look like when church leaders have done their work well:

1. Church members will stand firm in their faith and not be confused or convinced by competing strands of thought and belief either in the church or the wider culture.
2. Being secure in the faith, we will speak the truth to one another in love.
3. As we speak the truth to one another in love, we'll grow into the mature body of Christ.

Notice that this description looks in two directions. First, believers will stand firm in truth. Second, they will mature. Both are needed in the Christian life! Notice also how Paul talks about the body maturing: "We will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (v 15b). Literally, the Greek speaks of "growing up into him who is the head." (The ESV and NASB capture this wording a bit better than the NIV.) Think here of a teenager whose feet have grown faster than his legs. We might say something like, "He'll grow into them," meaning that the rest of his body will catch up to the growth in his feet. In the body of Christ, Jesus, the head, is already perfect while the church, the members of his body, are still growing into what we will be. We might say here that the church is "growing into its head" as the body catches up to the maturity already present in Christ. Thus, Christ is the goal of the church.

From another vantage point (seen in v 16) Christ is also the source of the church's life. It is "from him" that the body grows and builds itself up. In this light, Christ is both the goal and the source of the church's life. At the same time, Christ chooses to work through us in the process of building the church up. That's why v

16 speaks of the body “building itself up.” Christ is the source of all growth, but that growth is achieved as each part of the body plays its role and supports the rest of the body.

One final thing to note in the passage as a whole is that Paul has moved from unity (4:1-6) to diversity (4:7-13) and back to unity (4:14-16). We might summarize the passage like this:

1. 1-6: The church is united, and we should act like it!
2. 7-13: The members of the church are gifted with a diversity of gifts (we’re not all the same). One subset of gifts has to do with leaders who are tasked with equipping the church.
3. 14-16: When the leaders have done their work well (and it has been received by church members) the diverse members of the church function as one united body, building itself up to maturity.

TEACH THE TEXT

In teaching this text, I would focus on three different points: spiritual gifts, the purpose of church leaders, and maturity.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Part of the Spirit’s work in the lives of believers is to make us useful for ministry. He accomplishes this work by endowing all believers with “spiritual gifts,” which are special empowerments for particular kinds of ministries. When it comes to spiritual gifts, key scripture texts are Romans 12:3-8, 1 Cor 12:1-31, and Eph 4:1-16. Together, these passages list the following gifts of the spirit: prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leadership, showing mercy (all from Rom 12:1-8), messages of wisdom, messages of knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues (all from 1 Cor 12), apostleship, prophecy, pastoring/teaching, and evangelism (all from Eph 4:1-16; these four are spoken of in connection with the people who possess them: apostles, prophets, pastor/teachers, evangelists). Importantly this list is not necessarily exhaustive of all spiritual gifts, though it is widely descriptive of them.

The big deal with spiritual gifts is (1) all Christians are gifted for ministry and (2) everybody matters. While Eph 4 focuses on gifts for leadership, 1 Cor 12 focuses more on the interplay of gifts, and that may be a good place to spend time when introducing the idea of spiritual gifts to students. In that passage, Paul addresses a toxic mess where some church members have grown prideful because they have “better” gifts and others fell ashamed because they have “lesser” gifts. In the Corinthian context, the “better” gift in question was speaking in tongues. Paul confronts this problem by showing that the body is interdependent, meaning that everyone is necessary. More than this, he shows that God himself distributed the gifts as he saw fit (meaning that people shouldn’t be proud for the gift(s) they have).

In the North American Baptist context, we are similar and dissimilar to the Corinthians. Dissimilarities come with the gifts that we celebrate and experience. In many ways, the Corinthian focus on more “charismatic” gifts makes us uncomfortable! At the same time, Baptist churches are like the Corinthians in that there are times when people are overly proud or ashamed of their giftings. This is especially true when we talk about “up front” gifts like teaching and worship leading. For some, this is where the real action happens, and their

“behind the scenes” gifts aren’t as important. Nothing could be further from the truth! 1 Cor 12 and Eph 4 show that all gifts flow from Christ and should therefore be celebrated. Moreover, both passages show that all the parts of the body are needed. As you talk about Eph 4 and spiritual gifts, this is a wonderful opportunity to empower your people by affirming their giftings!

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Who does the work of ministry? Is it the pastors or the people? Really, it is both. Eph 4 makes it clear church leaders are meant to equip church members for ministry, which is a ministry in itself! This is an important understanding for our students to embrace. They come to church not just out of piety or because “that’s what Christians do.” Instead, they come to be equipped for the special ministry God has granted them.

MATURITY

In the passage, we saw that maturity looks in two directions. First, it is a firm planting in the truth of the faith. Second, it is growth toward Christ-likeness. It is important to emphasize both! Have you ever met a Christian who knew a lot about the Bible and theology but was mean as a snake? They were missing one side of maturity! Or have you ever met a Christian who was gung-ho for Jesus but kept getting side-tracked by the latest fads from America’s self-help gurus? They also were missing one side of maturity! We need growth in truth and Christlikeness if we are to grow up as Christians.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Vv 7-10

1. What does Paul mean when he talks about “grace” that has been given as Christ apportioned it.
2. What is the point of the OT quotation in v 8? What are the gifts that Christ gives?
3. Have you ever thought of yourself as gifted by Christ? How do we know our gifts?
4. What do you think Paul is talking about when he speaks of Jesus descending and ascending?

Vv 11-13

1. What “gifts” has Jesus given to the church according to these verses?
2. Why does Paul talk about people instead of the gifts themselves?
3. How would you define each of these roles in the church?
4. What are church leaders for?
5. What does this passage tell us about church members?

Vv 14-16

1. According to this passage, what does maturity look like?
2. Why is truth important to maturity?
3. Why is growth toward Christ-likeness important to maturity?
4. Do we really need both?

5. Someone explain what Paul means when he says that the body is to grow into the head.
6. What is the source of growth in the body?
7. How is the body actually built up?

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