

Church United: *Relentless Growth to Maturity*: Part 2
Ephesians 4:7-16

“until we all attain to the unity of the faith...to mature manhood...”

Introduction: Today we celebrate what is traditionally called “Palm Sunday”, since on the Sunday before Jesus rose, He entered into Jerusalem to the shouts of massive crowds, who “took branches of palm trees and went out to Him, crying out ‘*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!*’” (John 12:13-14) We know the crowds were large and excitable, since they were hoping to see Lazarus (John 12:9) whom Jesus had raised from the dead weeks before. While the jubilation was palpable, so was the angst of the religious leaders, who had made plans to put Lazarus to death (John 12:10 – I know, the irony), and had a standing order to arrest Jesus whenever they saw Him (John 11:57), with the intention of putting Him to death (John 11:53). There are several questions that come out of this day:

- **How did the crowd know that Jesus was coming?** – Seriously, in a world of instant communication, with flash mobs and text threads, we can get info out quickly, but not so in Jesus’ day. The answer is in the fact that Jesus had built the crowds up following Him back to Jerusalem as He did miracles along the way, and as Pilgrim saints entered Jerusalem before Shabbat Friday, they would have been in Jerusalem telling people he was coming (John 12:12) while Jesus stayed a couple miles away (Sabbath’s day journey) in Bethany.
- **Why was He not arrested on sight?** – The only thing the religious leaders of the day feared more than Jesus was the mob, and tried to maintain their control (John 11:48), as plastic as it was
- **If Jesus was lauded on Sunday, why was He nailed to a cross on Friday?** – Two main reasons, both of which have a bearing on our passage today. **1)** Jesus laid down His life for His own, and no one took it from Him, but laid it down on His OWN ACCORD (John 10:18). Jesus’ arrest, trial, and death was not a miscalculation or some misstep of strategy. Jesus was in COMPLETE CONTROL of the events that took place in Passion Week, and He willingly gave Himself up so that He could secure the ultimate victory. Jesus chose the cross to obey and honor His Father’s will (Luke 22:42), so that He could redeem and reconcile all that the Father had given Him (John 10:27-29). **2) Monday and Tuesday** – After Sunday’s joyful reception, Jesus took the religious leaders to task on the Temple Mount, pointing out the fact that their religion led to death (Matt. 23:15) and laying down a dividing line for the people: *will you forsake yourself, life, and your status in the Synagogue and follow me, or will you continue on as is* (John 12:42-43). What Jesus compelled the crowds and leaders to come to grips with was this: **He was there, as their King, with open arms, but they had to take Jesus on HIS TERMS, not theirs. They HAD to leave the life they had been living, deny self, and follow Him. Anything short would mean remaining in an unregenerate state for them, and a call to crucify Jesus Himself.**

This morning we will look again at the goal God set out for the growth of the church, and it has everything to do with maturity, perfection, and unity. When God draws us by His grace to believe, He calls us to follow Him with ALL of who we are, gifting us to be active in the building up of the church, with a new life and identity in Christ. In other words, half-hearted, partial, sorta-kinda, secret, or sometimes following Him will not cut it. Believers who have had their sins forgiven and lives redeemed from judgement are called all that He has commanded, to continually move toward holiness, and to do it relentlessly together.

Grace that Gives Gifts (v.7)

*But **grace** was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift*

Nature of Grace

Nature of Gifts

- **Scope, Prerequisite, Proportion, Category, Purpose**

Victory behind Giving Gifts (vv. 8-10)

Therefore, it says,

'When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men'

(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

An Understanding of Psalm 68

Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18, a Psalm about seeing God as a conquering king. Verse 18 paints a picture of an ancient King in the East returning from a battle campaign as a conqueror, ascending onto Mt. Zion. Often a king would ride a stallion at the forefront of a victory parade and would be followed by those who had been conquered, who would have been put in shackles and chains. As the king approached the final destination of the kingdom, he would receive gifts from his people as they would throw them down or place them before. This was a Psalm of David, and Paul interpreted it Messianically, which means it pointed to the work of Jesus to come. There are two main things to point out before unpacking the whole:

- 1) The point Paul was making was that since Jesus, like a conquering King, rose from the dead and was seated at the right hand of God in His resurrection, He had the authority to give gifts to His people (Eph. 1:20-21).
- 2) There is one main difference between the Psalm and re-quoting in Ephesians, which is somewhat problematic but solvable. In Psalm 68:18, the king RECEIVED gifts from people, where Ephesians changes the term to GAVE gifts. Why the change? Sometimes a king would redistribute the bounty He received from the people in a magnanimous show of care. But the greater point is that OUR Messiah, our king, is not one that only receives all praise and glory, He is also the One who lavishes graciously, who dispenses grace in salvation and in resourcing out His church.

An Understanding of Christ's Victory

Now, as to the rest of the aside in vv. 9-10, what is meant by ascending, descending, lower regions, and being far above the heavens. There are two main interpretations, and they both have merit and could be helpful:

- 1) Jesus descended to the the depths of Sheol and Hades, and the captives He brought with Him were OT saints from Sheol awaiting release – In 1 Pet. 3:18-20, Peter gives insight into where Jesus went after His death and before His resurrection. He had died in the flesh and was immediately made alive in spirit, and went to Hades and proclaimed (kerusso, not euangellion) to the spirits in prisoner His victory on the cross. There were demonic spirits from the time of Noah (Genesis 6) who tried to thwart God’s redemptive plan by breeding out humanity who God uniquely locked up from then until now. Jesus went to pronounce what they tried to thwart was accomplished in full. The captives then, would have been those He took out of Sheol, or the OT holding place of the righteous dead, and took them to heaven with Him. This interpretation has much merit with early scholars, and absolutely could be right. However, there is another option as well.
- 2) Jesus descended to the earth in His humanity, taking on flesh as a servant (Phil. 2:9-11), and the captives were Satan and his hosts who were put into subjection under His feet when He ascended to heaven (Eph. 1:21-22). This also focuses on His **victory on the cross, His authority in His ascension, and His ability to give every blessing in the heavenlies** (Eph. 1:3). This seems to fit the context the best, but either way, the point that Paul is making is clear: Jesus was victorious on the cross, over His enemies, and because HE FULFILLED THE LAW and was our PERFECT SUBSTITUTE, He is able to graciously give gifts to His people, not only in salvation, but in gifting for use in the church.

Corporate Benefit of Gifts Given (v. 11)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers...

Gifts Given to the Church as a whole

Now Paul moves from individual gifts possessed by every believer to the fact that God gave some gifts to the church as a whole, and in particular, there are **4 gifts of people or roles that have helped the church from the beginning**, the first two having to do with the start of the church and the last two with the continuing of the church.

The Apostle and Prophets – We are indebted to these groups. When Jesus ascended and left His disciples to proliferate the church the apostles played a role of having authority and setting the ground of teaching (Acts 2:42), and the prophets would continue on that teaching role until the canon of the NT was completed. **Ephesians 2:20 singles these out as foundation layers of the church:** *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.”* God used this group to reveal they mystery of the gospel that had not been revealed to generations (Eph. 3:5). Along with these roles, they had the gifts of healing, miracles, tongues, and prophecy (1 Cor. 12:27-29) to aid in this foundation laying, validating the message and messenger. Today, there is no apostolic succession and there is no authoritative gift like these where men speak a new Word from the Lord.

The Evangelists and Pastor-Teachers – We have very little description of the role of evangelist, with Philip being identified as one (Acts 21:8) and that Timothy was to engage in the work of the evangelist (2 Tim. 4:2). This would be an outward focusing gift, this who would bring the message of the gospel to new areas, much like modern day missionaries. Evangelism is not something most do easily though all believers are called to, but there are some that God gives the unique gift to reach the lost to build up the Body.

The last category is the main functional role in our modern church. Though it looks like 2 separate categories in English, the Greek construction dictates that this is one grouping of pastor-teacher. The word “AND” (‘kai’) often has the meaning ‘that is’ or ‘in particular’ and indicates that the shepherds and teachers are viewed as a common group, i.e. “teaching shepherds”. “Pastor” is not a widely used NT word, but is used as a verb in Acts 20:28, where elders/overseers are to CARE for or SHEPHERD God’s church, the flock of God. The picture of a pastor/shepherd/bishop/elder is one that cares, protects, and feeds the people God has entrusted to them. A pastor is to lead by example (1 Pet. 5:3) through solidified character (1 Tim. 3:1-7), teaching in public and from house to house with a message of faith and repentance (Acts 20:20-21), willing to admonish with tears (Acts 20:31; 1 Thess. 5:14). But the main way that a pastor helps the congregation grow is through teaching the Word.

Basis which the Gifts operate

How do we change and grow to become more like Christ? 1) We are perfected but the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as He brings clarity, conviction, and changes our desires (Galatians 3:3). 2) We change through the trials God presents us with uniquely, knowing that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness and perfection (James 1:2-3). These first two are connected in the sense that this is what God does in and through us to mature us. How does He use pastor-teachers? 3) Presenting the banquet of God’s Word. “Like newborn infants, long for (crave) the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2). God changes us from the inside out through the Spirit, brings trials and suffering to cause us to trust Him, but He gifts the church to help us grow in our understanding, desire, and love for God’s Word, so that we will grow in our love and understanding of God in Christ.

The picture of a healthy, effective church given here is not complicated, but those experience the fruit of this health seems limited. How do we walk worthy to the glory of God? We are unified through His work on our behalf, by the grace given to us individually and corporately, so that we would all grow in maturity, regardless of our differences. This happens when we all embrace the reality that we need each other, that we all have a roll to play, a gift to exercise, and people to serve. We want to grow as a church, and that cannot be mere sentiment or wishful thinking, but the deep desire for each of us to glorify God with our lives.

Pathway for the Gifts to Operate (12)

“To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ...”

Paul now addresses the pathway of operation for both the individual gifts and the corporate gifts. If there was a playbook of philosophy of church ministry that could be condensed into one idea, this might be the most potent and impactful verse in terms of how a church operates and functions together. It answers the questions: what is the role of a pastor, and what should everyone in the church do?

- **Preparing Everyone:** *To equip the saints*

Of first importance in this phrase is “the saints”. This is a classification for those who are redeemed, born again, and true followers of Jesus Christ. Paul already has addressed the church at Ephesus this way in 1:1, 15, 18, 3:8, and 3:18, and it differentiates in two ways: 1) Redeemed vs. unredeemed, meaning it is not addressing those outside of the church or those who are NOT born again, since they would not possess the gifts given by Christ and the Spirit. 2) ALL the saints, meaning not one is left out. This is addressing every single true believer in a church. Some may believe they can be a follower of Christ outside OF the church, but there is no Biblical justification for this

Paul uses a fascinating word here, the word translated “equip”. It’s a word often used for the idea of mending, like fixing a net, or a medical term used for setting a bone. It has the idea of a dynamic act by which a persons or things are properly conditioned, to be **prepared and trained**. The goal or hope for all the saints/believers in any church is to train them, preparing them, getting them ready for usefulness. This means it is the job of every believer to be preparing themselves, to view themselves in the church as those who will be ministers and workers, so there is a proactive desire to be trained in God’s Word, in philosophy of ministry, and in practical service. So, the **job of pastor-teacher is to equip through the Word and example of life**. Pastors are not hired so that they can DO all the ministry, but are placed in positions in order to TRAIN others to do as well, including entrusting the teaching of God’s Word to others (2 Tim. 2:1-2)

- **Ready for Everything:** *for the work of ministry*

So, who DOES the ministry in the church? All believers. This is no small statement. It means we are most effective to glorify God when we are all equipped, all are willing to serve, and are all helping build up the church. Notice two important aspects here of what we are to do:

- 1) Ministry is WORK – This means that there is nothing easy in ministry. In 2 Tim. 4:5, Timothy is directed to do the WORK of evangelism. Why? Because evangelism is hard. The Thessalonian church was lauded for their labor of love, a word that meant laboring to the point of exhaustion. In 1 Cor. 15:15-18, the household of Stephanas was lauded for their devotion to the service of the saints. This does not mean that ministry is not joyful or fruitful, but it does mean it will take an exertion, and must become a priority since we work at the things that are most important in our life
- 2) Ministry is MULTI-FACETED — A survey of the word “diakonos” yields a diverse scope of what ministry in the church encapsulates. Paul was given a ministry of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 20:24, 21:19; Rom. 11:13). The aforementioned Stephanas SERVED the

saints in the church. We have all been given the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:13, 6:3) since we have the message of reconciliation and view ourselves as servants. Fulfilling ministry was done by being sober-minded, enduring suffering, and doing the work of evangelism (2 Tim. 4:5). Ministry, then, is broad enough to contain physical and spiritual service, caring for the whole person. The “Work of Ministry” promotes the idea of activity and has to do with a mindset and mentality, and we serve in ways that move from helping someone move, to bringing a meal, to counseling through hard parenting or marriage issues, to sitting with and encouraging the depressed and sad, to calling people to repentance, to sharing the gospel with our neighbor, to visiting the sick, to listening to those who need a friend.

Before looking at the goal of ministry, it’s a good place to reemphasize this: how many ministers do we have at this church? Some may say as many as we have on staff. Some may say as many recognized elders or leaders. But the answer is truly, as many true believers we have in this church. Our goal is to have a church full of active, committed, growing members who are here to serve, love, and help wherever and whenever is needed, not leaving things up to “someone else” or “professionals”, and as there are things we are not equipped for, we seek to get trained in those as well. If you are here this morning and are a born-again believer, you are in ministry.

- **Growing for Evermore:** *for the building up of the body of Christ*

The church is truly a living and growing organism, not just an organization of policies and committees. How do we know that our activity is truly ministry and not just meeting the felt needs of people? The answer is: is what we are engaged in helping the “building up of the body of Christ”. Are we helping in the maturation, the development, the growing unity of the church or are we simply doing things that suit ourselves? The idea of “building up a body” harkens to a workout or exercise analogy, means that a lack of exercise will leave the church unhealthy, but a hard working, active, moving body will continue to be strengthened, will build higher thresholds, and will have the energy to be used in all kinds of ways by the Lord.

As we think about Christ at Easter, we remember His victory on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Because He is victorious, we do not have to live in uncertainty because He won. We are free to work, to serve, and to engage in ways that are meaningful because we know they will be effective. Christ did not call His church to the bear minimum or the path of least resistance but to hard things, and He gave us gifts, both individually and corporately in order to work to the fullest.

In a couple of weeks, we’ll look at the marks of maturity and how we grow up together, but for now its imperative that we see we are all called to ministry, to the building up of the body of Christ.