

Gifts From The Victor

Ephesians 4:7-13

As we have moved into Ephesians 4, we have seen that Paul is beginning to emphasize that the unity Christ died to give us must be cared for and preserved very carefully. His argument is that we can best do that by being very careful about the way we live, the way we treat each other, the things we say, and so forth.

Today we come to a difficult passage, one that has many, many different interpretations. After studying it and reading all the explanations given by various scholars, my head is still spinning! I hesitate to add my own ideas to the mix, but since we are touring Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and since we have come to it, we must stop today to look at it.

But we can't just pull this passage out, set it over here by itself and hope to understand it. We have to look at it where it is, and see how it relates to the verses around it. That's called "context," and it is very important any time you are reading and studying Scripture. In verse 3, Paul has just encouraged us to "*make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" In verse one, he told us that this is important because of the calling God has placed on our lives. And in verse two, he gave us some essentials for maintaining that unity: humility, gentleness, patience and love.

But then he does something unexpected! He's been telling us that unity is important, but then he tells us that we are all different! Look at verse seven: "*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*" So we are reminded that unity does not mean that we are all the same. Actually, it takes all of us, each with our own set of gifts, to make the Body work. It was God's plan that this unity works best in diversity, a concept which sounds ridiculous to the world.

Then in verses 8-10, Paul seems to get sidetracked. Verse eight reads, "*This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'*" Verse nine is a reference to the grave: "*What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?*" And it is very easy to lose our focus here by arguing about what that could possibly mean. The main point is in verse ten: "*He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.*" The passage is about Christ, of course, and the emphasis is on the fact that having shed His Blood on the Cross, the victorious Christ then rose from the dead and returned to His throne in heaven.

The images Paul used here would have been very familiar to his first century readers. We, however, might need to explore this a little so it's clear to us as well. This is a great example of how understanding the background of a Scripture passage can make it come alive in our hearts and minds.

When a king in the ancient world won an important military victory, he would bring back the spoils of war, carried in a parade to display to the people. Sometimes these processions would last two or three days. Captured enemies would be chained together and pulled along in disgrace behind the general's chariot. If any of his own soldiers had been previously captured, the general would include them in the parade as well. These were called "recaptured captives"—prisoners of war who had been taken prisoner again by their own general and then given freedom. There would be singing, burning incense, scattering of flowers, and much applause. When the Romans had a parade of this kind, the general would be given the lifelong title of "Man of Triumph." This parade and title was the highest honor that could be bestowed to a Roman general.

That is what is behind Ephesians 4:7-10. Paul pictures Christ as the General, or the King, going out to war, by descending to earth. Having won the victory on the Cross, He then ascended back to Heaven, leading His captives behind Him. That's also the image Paul had when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:14—*"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him."* He saw himself—and us—as being captured, or re-captured, by Christ in the battle for the souls of mankind.

But get this. In Ephesians 4:8 Paul is referring to Psalm 68:18, where we read, *"When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you **received** gifts from men..."* But here in Ephesians it reads, *"He led captives in his train, and **gave** gifts to men."* Do you see the difference? In Psalm 68 God is **receiving** gifts; in Ephesians 4 Christ is **giving** gifts. That's an important difference. Before, the general or king returning from battle would be the recipient of all kinds of honors and gifts and accolades from the hometown crowd, and that's what Psalm 68 refers to. But Christ has turned that around. In His triumph, He receives the honors and praise, but then disburses the spoils of war to His people. In fact, sometimes the returning victor would actually disburse gifts to the people from the spoils of war. The bravest soldiers from the battle were publicly awarded special gifts.

But these spoils of war—these gifts from Christ—are not jewels, gold or silver. The Bible calls them “spiritual gifts,” and Paul names just a few of them in Ephesians 4:11—*“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”* Let’s look at the Gifts from the Victor.

1 The gifts are given to every believer, v. 7

The very definition of a gift means that the ones receiving the gift did not pay for it. This is a case of something that is so obvious that it might be overlooked. Let us never forget that the gifts that the victorious Christ has given to the church have been given to us by Him, and that we did not earn them ourselves. The gifts outlined for us in Scripture are not the result of our ingenuity. They did not come about because of our citizenship as Americans, nor are they result of clever design on our part. They are *gifts*; they are *given* to us.

Pay attention to these words: *“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”* “To each one” means that no one has been left out or overlooked. This is a truth found more than once in Scripture. 1 Corinthians 12:7 reads, *“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”* He names a few of the gifts, then a few verses later he writes, *“All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one just as he determines.”* And 1 Peter 4:10 gives us some plain and clear insight into these gifts: *“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”*

It is an insult to Christ for any of us to say, “Well, I hear people talking about spiritual gifts all the time, but *I* don’t have one.” Every time the Scriptures teach us about spiritual gifts, we also learn that every believer has at least one—no exceptions. You may not know what yours is, or may not have discovered it yet, but if you belong to Christ, you are included in this showering of gifts on God’s people. So let us state the obvious once again: these gifts are *given*, and they are *given to every one of us!*

2 The gifts are different, v. 11

Paul names several of the gifts to the church here: *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”* This is not intended to be an exhaustive list. There are four chapters in the New Testament that are devoted to the subject of spiritual gifts, and we can look at them another time, but these are not the only gifts He has

given. In those other places Paul focuses on the individual *gifts*, but here his concentration is on the *individuals* Christ has given to the Church.

Each of these had their own distinct emphasis, and each of them had a specific function in the Church. It is not so important for our purposes today to look at them in detail, except to know that they were different one from the others. But let's take a quick look. *Apostles* refers to those commissioned directly by the Lord Himself. *Prophets* were not necessarily those who told the future, but those who spoke for God. *Evangelists* were those who traveled around, preaching the Gospel wherever they went. *Pastors and teachers* were linked together in the original language, and probably referred to the church's primary teachers.

The biggest point is that they were all different, but they were all given to the Church by the victorious Christ to carry out the work of the Church.

3 The gifts have the same purposes, vv. 12-13

In verse twelve, Paul then goes on to show us that even though there are different gifts, they all share common purposes. Think about all these gifts the conquering Christ has given us as going into the top of a funnel, but they all come out at the bottom to serve one purpose. Or think of the different ingredients of a cake, each of them different and separate, but when mixed together they serve one purpose. That's the way it is with these gifts to the church.

These two verses describe several purposes the gifts have in common. ***The first purpose of these gifts is to prepare God's people for service, v. 12.*** Look at that word translated "prepare." The general idea of this word is to put something in the condition that it ought to be. For example, it was used to describe a broken bone that had to be reset, or refitting a ship that may have been damaged in a storm. Another way this word was used had to do with building a house, then furnishing it completely with everything the occupants might need. That is what Christ has done with the Church through giving the gifts.

The second purpose of these gifts is to build up the Body of Christ, v. 12. The *King James Version* uses the word "edifying," and the word actually refers to constructing a building. It is also used to describe all of the other spiritual gifts Christ has given us. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:12, "*...try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*"

So what this means for us today is that while each of us have been given a spiritual gift, and while each of those gifts is different one from the other, they all should be

developed and used in order that the Church should be built up and strengthened. Never should a man or woman allow their spiritual gift to become a source for division or contention in the Church.

The third purpose of these gifts is to enable us to reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, v. 13. There's that word "unity" again—Paul was really focused on it, wasn't he? That's because even though we have been "gifted" differently, our function is "*the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,*" as we read back up in verse three. The meaning behind the words used here is "to reach a goal." The goal is "*the knowledge of Christ,*" as we read in verse 13—that we might know Him better and more intimately through the exercise of the spiritual gifts Christ has bestowed on us.

The fourth purpose of these gifts is to enable us to mature in the faith, v. 13. The *King James Version* reads, "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The idea is that of growing up, reaching maturity. As the conquering monarch, Christ has granted these spiritual gifts to His Church so that we can finish growing up and becoming all He intends for us to be. There are Christians who are not nearly as mature as they ought to be, because they've never invested the time or surrendered their hearts in order that they might be fully equipped.

Every bit of this is important. Leave out one and the Church suffers. Take the smallest piece out of the circuitry of your cell phone, and it will not work. The Lord Jesus Christ, having conquered death, has returned to His throne in victory, and as we give Him praise and accolades for His victory, He in turn endows His Church with everything we need to continue to do His work. And that means that every one of us matters!

And since these are all important, every one of us should make absolutely sure that we have discovered what our gifts are. This has nothing to do with your age or how long you've been a believer. Every believer has been given a gift, even if we don't know what it is. The gifts are different, so that sets me free from trying to be like someone else; I should just be the individual God has created me to be, and I can joyously serve Him and His Church as me, and not as someone else. I don't have to measure myself against someone else in the Church—and neither do you. And we can be certain that once we are allowing the spiritual gift we've been given to be used in the Church, that the Church and the Kingdom of God are being built up and strengthened.

As always, we end this message with a challenge. Our victorious Christ has given gifts as a result of His victory, and He has left no one out. He has overlooked no one. And *that* is the very reason God has placed you here. It's not to sit on the pew and watch others. Rick Warren has said, "God gave me a gift, not for me but for you, and God gave you a gift, not for you but for me. If you don't use your gift, you're depriving me; if I don't use my gift, I'm robbing you."

Are you willing today to begin spending time with Him to discover what your role in the Church really is, and how you can make a difference serving Him? How are your gifts being used to build up the Church?