

He Thinks You're God's Gift To Mankind

Ephesians 4:7-13 September 13, 2023

Ephesians 4:7-13 - ⁷Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸For it says: When he ascended on high, he took the captives captive; he gave gifts to people. ⁹But what does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things. ¹¹And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.

Do you know someone who acts like they're God's gift to mankind? Usually they have an inflated ego and overestimate their contribution to the world around them.

Paul has been describing the wealth of our salvation and our membership in the Body of Christ. We find ourselves in a curious position because, on the one hand, he just finished saying we should be humble - *not* thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. But tonight he explains that you are God's gift to the Church and to mankind by extension.

This knowledge shouldn't result in human arrogance, but in heavenly activity. Paul alluded to this back in chapter 3 where he said, "God has given me as a gift on your behalf. My imprisonment, the mysteries revealed to me, my preaching in Ephesus, is all part of God's gracious gifting."

If you are a member of the Body, *you* are a special part in God's plan - a specially tailored gift prepared for the benefit of the Church.

Ephesians 4:7 - ⁷Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

We've been learning about how we are part of a great, unified work God accomplishes through history. But, that doesn't mean you're simply a cog in His cosmic machine or some a worker ant carrying your load. The queen ant doesn't care when a few of her workers get stepped on. They're immediately replaced and forgotten.

But that's not God's mindset toward you. Verse 7 brings out the distinct specificity of God's plan.

The *New Living Translation* brings us verse 7 this way: "*He has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.*" There is no Christian who God does not give a special, personalized gift. Not buffet style. Not out of the leftover bin. Handcrafted and designed for you.

Why does God gift us? He gifts us for the common good - so we can bless others and build the Church. That's the message of Ephesians 4 and Romans 12 and 1 Peter 4. There Peter says:

1 Peter 4:10a - ¹⁰ Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others

In those passages we find that there are all sorts of different gifts. Different activities that enhance our lives but are primarily for *others*.¹ They are given out of God's grace.

We think of the wonderful generosity of God's *saving* grace. Paul talked a lot about it in the opening chapters of this book. But not only is there *saving* grace, there is also *serving* grace.² Just as powerful, just as loving, just as precious as God's grace that washes away our sin.

When God gives a gift, it is not according to *your* ability. What did Karl Marx teach? "*From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.*" If you don't have ability, you've got problems. That's not how God operates. He gives based off the measure of *Christ's* gift. He gives from His stores of grace. In chapter 3, we were told that God's riches are incalculable. In chapter 1 we were told that the Lord *lavishly* pours out His gifts on us.

As you walk with God you are *overflowed* with His matchless grace to do all He has for you to do.

Ephesians 4:8 - ⁸ For it says: When he ascended on high, he took the captives captive; he gave gifts to people.

Scholars spend a lot of pages arguing about verses 8 through 13. There's disagreement over just about every phrase. Sometimes they can't even agree on *how many* disagreements there are! Who are the captives? What is meant by ascended and descended? Are pastors and teachers one group or two groups or a group within another group?

The main controversy is in verse 8 and it's worth mentioning because it *looks* like Paul purposefully misquotes the Scripture he's referencing. In your Bible, you undoubtedly have a little note telling you that Paul is quoting Psalm 68:18. The problem is, it looks like Paul made 5 minor and 2 major changes to the verse.³ For example, it looks like he changed "received" gifts to "gave" gifts.

Messing with Scripture is a big no-no. You don't add or take away from the Word of God. Paul warned the Ephesians about false teachers coming in and "distorting" the truth. Peter also warned about people twisting the Scriptures. So what's going on here?

Some say he was quoting an early hymn. Some say he was quoting a traditional paraphrase influenced by rabbinic tradition.⁴ Some suggest Paul just remembered the verse wrong!⁵

¹ Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

² R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

³ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

⁴ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

⁵ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

The most reasonable explanation is that Paul is not specifically quoting Psalm 68:18, but is summarizing the whole Psalm. At its end, we're told that God give gifts in addition to receiving them. So Paul is absolutely in line with what the Holy Spirit inspired David to write.

The important idea in the Psalm and in Paul's usage of it is that Christ is absolutely victorious over all enemies and He has total power and authority to rule this universe according to His will.

In verse 8, we see Christ victorious in a triumphal parade. In the Roman empire, after a great military victory, they would host a celebration parade called a triumph. The commander would lead wearing a crown and a purple garment in a four-horse chariot. Behind him came his army, his captives, and the spoils of war.⁶

Are the captives Satan and his minions, forever defeated? Or is it *us*, those who were once enslaved to sin, doomed to die, now *liberated* by the King of kings? Both are realities of Christ's triumph. We *are* His plunder - bought with His blood - wrenched from the grip of sin and ushered into the Kingdom of Righteousness. We who were once enemies now citizens and sons.

There's a sweet thing here. Where we read "He took captives captive," the words can be translated, "[He] captured a catch."⁷ *You are a catch in God's eyes!* A pearl of great price. Worth all He has to make His own.

He catches you with His love, gives you gifts, and then *gifts you* as a gift to others.

Ephesians 4:9-10 - ⁹But what does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things.

Paul is speaking about Christ here. In chapter 1 Christ is identified as the One who fills all things.

Where did Jesus "descend" to? Not to *hell*. If you're familiar with the Apostle's Creed, you know that it says, "[Christ] was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell." That gives the wrong impression that Christ suffered in the Lake of Fire. That's not what *hell* means in the Creed.

In the Bible there are different terms for what might be generally called the underworld or the abode of the dead. There is Gehenna, which is the Lake of Fire. There is also Hades, which is a place where dead but not-yet-resurrected people go or *used* to go. It was divided into two parts, one for the righteous, one for the wicked. The wicked side is still inhabited. The righteous side is empty.

After His crucifixion, Jesus went to the good side of Hades, called *Paradise*. Remember what He said to the thief beside him: "Today you will be with Me in paradise."

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_triumph

⁷ Markus Barth *Ephesians 4-6: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*

Why *did* Jesus descend from heaven? Why did He ascend *back* to heaven? Wouldn't it be better for Him to just live in power with us here and now? Well, one day He *will*. But first He has ascended above all the heavens. He has done these things to save us. To bridge the gap.

There is such a wide separation between holy God and sinful man. We have no hope, no future, unless God Himself closes that gap. And so, out of love, He came down, made a way, provides a path for us and now prepares a place for us in eternity.

Sometimes it's hard for us to get up off the couch for the ones we love, isn't it? But, oh the things God has done for you and me. He descended from heaven itself, came to a devastated earth, descended into the grave, defeated death, all so that we could be saved from our guilt.

He did the impossible and now *continues* His work to fill all things. He doesn't hang out a sign that says "Gone fishin'!" He says, "Still filling!"

Are *you* filled? Are *you* reconciled with this Savior? Are you on the path that leads to life?

Paul reveals not only the *selfless love* of God, but also His *singular power*. You see, in the Roman mind, there was a tenuous balance of power between the gods who didn't really like each other and didn't necessarily like human beings. Sometimes the gods would invade and do things. For example, in Roman mythology, the god Hades once invaded the underworld in order to kidnap Persephone, the daughter of Zeus. This led to famine for mankind.

Paul cuts through all of that and says, "This is the deal: There *is* an underworld, but it's not what your mythology teaches. There's *One* God. He rules everything. He descended, He ascended, and nothing can stop Him. There's no instability in His power. In fact, Jesus' resurrection and ascension proves once and for all that He is *exactly* Who He said He was and He is now at the right hand of the Father, ruling and reigning forever and ever."

Ephesians 4:11 - ¹¹And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

We sometimes refer to these as *offices* in the Church, but let's remember how Paul has been describing things. He wants us to think about the Church as a *body*. Every Christian is a *member* of this Body, which has all sorts of purposes and functions. Paul uses this list as an example of some of the gifts God gives to His people. It's not a comprehensive list. Where are the deacons? Where are the elders? Where are the miracles? Where is the hospitality?

It's not meant to be a rigid list.⁸ Instead, we can think of the organs of a body. Each one has a special function, but it must be integrated into the whole. We may have great affection for the

⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones *Differing Gifts*

heart, but the heart is of no use if you have no lungs. Each is needful and special and works with its own ability but as part of the harmonious whole.

We should note that everyone on Paul's list is involved in proclaiming the Word of God.⁹ So we must always come back to that. The world needs a lot of help. Our fellow Christians need a lot of help. But we always have to come back to the primacy of the preaching of the Word of God. *That* is the greatest activity we can be involved in.

Paul's list isn't comprehensive, and it also isn't mutually exclusive.¹⁰ Paul could be given every one of the titles he listed. And it's not something you pick, like a major in college. It is *Christ* Who gives these gifts to the Church. It's *His* decision. It's *His* design. You do not pick your calling, you *hear* your calling and answer it and walk worthy of it.

God gifts people and fashions a life for them as a gift to the Church because *He* knows what is needed in a certain time and place. *This* is the way he has decided to advance His work.¹¹ Through people like you and me who He fills up with grace and then tailors to certain good works in a certain time and a certain place among certain people. People who are called and sent and live in the power of His salvation, which operates in love and grace and truth.

Here's why God gifts people to the Church:

Ephesians 4:12 - ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ,

You come to church for a variety of reasons. You come to offer worship to God. You come to be encouraged by the company of your spiritual family. But God says a major reason why you and I come to church is so that we can be *equipped to do the work of ministry*.

Equipped is a rich term. It can mean *mended* or *restored*.¹² Outside the New Testament, it was used in medical writings for the straightening or setting of a joint or broken bone.¹³ It describes a the preparation of the weaving of a garment. It also can be translated as "perfected."¹⁴

It is absolutely mind-blowing that God uses you and me in His work of *perfecting* His people. *We* are agents of His sanctification in the lives of others. This is another reason why actually being connected to a local church fellowship is so essential. *You can't do this part of Christianity alone!*

We need to be equipped for the work of ministry. The term he uses for ministry is *diakonia*. *THERE* are the deacons! *All* of us! All called to be like Stephen and Phoebe and the others listed in the New Testament. People who had a good reputation and were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,

⁹ Witherington

¹⁰ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

¹¹ *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

¹² *CSB Study Bible Notes*

¹³ Thielman

¹⁴ See the *International Standard Version*

who proclaimed the Word of God boldly, and were given special duties of serving those in need in their community.

All of us are meant to be growing in *that* ministry, *that* walk of faith. Paul says God gifts each of us to the Church so that it can grow and strengthen and develop in these grace-filled ways.

Ministry is not about magnifying an individual. It's about Church growth. What kind of Church growth?

Ephesians 4:13 - ³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.

This is the goal. Not a bigger building. Not a beefier bank account. Church growth is about the health of the Body (capital B), not the *number* of bodies in seats. Now, there's nothing wrong with *God* adding to the Church as He sees fit. But our ministry goal is given to us right here: Unity in faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ and growing into maturity.

We're to measure our health using Christ as the standard, not worldly standards of growth. The goal is that we would be growing into Him, and that we would be doing it *with* others. This takes us back to what Paul said about unity in the previous verses. If I'm not being built up in my faith and knowledge of God's Son, if I'm not maturing, on *some* level the whole body suffers.

So I'm part of the whole, but I'm an individual, *specific* part. A *special* part. I have this individual duty, a personal walk to walk, and as I do that I not only get filled up with grace and strength, but I then become a beneficial organ in the Body of Christ. I become part of the mission to *reach* unity. That's a term the book of Acts uses to describe travelers arriving at their destination.¹⁵ I become part of the equipping process that God accomplishes through His people, one to another. It cannot be done in isolation. It cannot be done if I detach myself from the assembly of Believers. It is done *in* the Body, *for* the Body, *by* the Body as the grace and power of God unites and infuses us.

God has gifted you. He's carved out a path for your life. But, we've seen here, God has tailored you as a *gift* to His Church. He's gone to considerable trouble to install power and purpose in your life. To not only deliver you from sin, but to deliver you as a blessing to His Body.

While we recognize that it's all the Lord's doing and cultivate humility, it is important to understand that *you are God's gift to the Church*. Just like Paul was important to the Ephesians, like Stephen was important to the Hellenistic widows of Jerusalem, like Phoebe was important to the church in Cenchræe, *you* are important to the life of the Church where God wants you to attach yourself.

¹⁵ BKC