

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
October 11, 2020

Ephesians 4:7-12 “Gifts of Our Ascended Lord”

Intro. Last Sunday we began a new section in Ephesians dealing with the practical aspects of daily Christian living. Paul says that we should live a life that is worthy of the high calling of God. It is interesting to me that as Paul talks about a worthy life, he begins with the believer’s relationship with the church. You cannot live a life pleasing to God apart from a good and right relationship with a local church.

In verses 2-6, I shared with you Paul’s emphasis on the unity of Church. Now in our text today, he passes from the Church as a whole to its individual members and discusses our functional diversity. Paul moves from what all Christians have in common to how Christians differ from each other. The unity is born of a common faith and spiritual experiences. The diversity has to do with the different functional services carried out by Christians. Unity is consistent with having a variety of gifts and offices.

My text of Scripture is very important in giving us a better understanding of how the church is to function. I want to ask you a question. How many ministers does our church have? Some may say 2, referring to Drew and me. But the fact is, *every* member of the church is to be a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ. V.12 says that the saints are to be equipped for a work of ministry. You are to be involved in the ministry of the local church! Vance Havner has well said, “Christianity began as a company of lay witnesses; it has become a professional pulpitism, financed by lay spectators.” I hope you will be challenged this evening not to be just a spectator, but to be an active participant in the life of the church.

Now I have good news. God does not call you to be a minister in this church without also providing ways for you to be equipped to serve effectively. He has given you spiritual gifts, and he has given to His church gifted leaders to help you learn how to serve well. So I want to start out by sharing with you:

I. THE REALITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Paul briefly touches on the subject of spiritual gifts beginning in v.7. In the last of v.7 he talks about “Christ’s gift.” Then in the last of v.8 that Christ “gave gifts to men.” Here and elsewhere he points out that each member of the church has received a spiritual gift to enable us to serve the Lord in some way. So as we examine this truth, consider with me:

A. The Definition of Spiritual Gifts - Evidently the Ephesians did not need any detailed instruction on this subject. However, you can find much more about spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12-14, Romans 12, and bit more in 1 Peter 4. And so for the benefit of those who need more instruction, let me give a brief definition of spiritual gifts. They are not natural-born talents. They are God-given enablements to help the people of God serve Him in one or more ways.

There are two different terms used in Scripture to identify these gifts. First, in other Scriptures they are called “spiritual gifts” because they are abilities empowered by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes our spiritual gifts are just the opposite of our natural born abilities. Moses said, “Lord, I cannot speak.” The Lord said, “Who made your mouth and your tongue?” God was

ready and willing to enable Moses to speak for Him, even though he didn't have natural abilities to do so. How wonderful it is to see God take weakness and make it into strength.

Secondly, they are called "grace gifts" because they are abilities that are given by grace, not because we have earned them, or deserve them. In v.7 Paul says, "But to each one of us grace was given...." Here he is talking about grace gifts, not grace for daily living. We are to recognize our spiritual gift as a gift of grace, and not as the product of his own skill or ingenuity. This fact should prevent us from becoming prideful about our gift. Evidently there was always the danger that those who had received very special endowments might overestimate their importance, or give themselves the credit for them. For example, those who have the gift of teaching or preaching are not "better" than those who have the gift of service. Whatever gift you have is not a reflection of any merit or lack of merit on your part. It is all of grace. So each believer should be content with his gift, neither envying those whose gifts are more conspicuous and honorable in the eyes of men, nor looking down on those that seem less so than his own.

We not only see the definition of spiritual gifts, but I also want you to see from our text:

B. The Distribution of Spiritual Gifts - There is an emphasis upon the words "to each one." None are excluded. Spiritual gifts are not given just to the leaders of the church. Every Christian has a gift of some kind. Each believer is gifted to contribute to the ministry and growth of the church. The New Testament affords no hint of a priestly caste... but this is just another evidence of the universal priesthood of believers, each occupying his proper place in the body of Christ.

Do you know what your spiritual gift is? If not, you need to find out. If so, you need to recognize it as a gift from God. So in addition to the reality of spiritual gifts, let us consider together:

II. THE RESOURCES OF OUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Your ability comes from Christ. He is your resource. We are also going to see that you are to be helped along with the aid of gifted leaders. So let's see together the resources of our spiritual gifts.

A. Jesus Gives You Your Spiritual Gifts – This is express in the last of v.7. Notice that Spiritual gifts are distributed "according to the measure of Christ's gift." The exalted Lord is sovereign in the distribution of gifts. This phrase may also emphasize the abundant resource of spiritual gifts that Christ has to offer. Then in v.8 he says, "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men." He's talking about Jesus there, using a loose quotation from Psalm 68:18. The imagery of this verse is that of a military conqueror leading captives in triumph and laden with spoils, which he distributes to his followers. The Bible says in 2 Cor. 2:14, "Now thanks be unto God who always causes us to triumph in Christ." Not only did Christ earn a great victory, but His followers share in that victory in many ways.

Now there are 4 aspects of how Christ fulfilled this prophecy:

1. Christ Descended from Heaven – This is stated by Paul in v.9 as a parenthetical comment. Paul shows what the ascension of Christ presupposes. Normally, an ascent does not necessarily presuppose a previous descent. The solution lies in the fact that Paul is not stating a general law but is speaking about Christ, and is saying that in His case ascent implied (previous) descent. Paul is saying that the ascension of such a divine Person as is described by the psalmist

necessarily implies a previous descent by that Person from His heavenly abode.

When Christ came to earth, He accomplished a great victory. In the conquest of the Old Testament king, Paul saw our Lord's triumph over death as well as over him that had the power of death, even Satan (Heb. 2:14).

One big question here is this: where was it that Jesus descended to? What does he mean by "the lower parts of the earth?" That exact phrase is only found here. There are several interpretations. 1) It could simply be a reference to our Lord's descent to the earth itself. For if the word *anabas* is a reference to the Ascension of Christ, then the *katabas* would be the Descent (Incarnation) to earth and *tes ges* (of the earth) would be the genitive of apposition (Roberson). The essence of this is found in Phil. 2:5-11: "He emptied himself...and became obedient even to the extent of death; yes, death by a cross." Jesus descended all the way to the cross. He came all the way down to the cross and on that old cross He shed His blood for our sins. 2) It could refer to His occupancy of the garden-tomb (cf. Ps. 71:20). 3) It could refer to a descent to Hades, or something similar right after His death. During the Old Testament period many believe that Sheol or Hades had two sides: a place of suffering for the wicked, and Paradise for the saints of God. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today, you shall be with me in Paradise." Jesus went down to Paradise and I can almost hear Him say, "Saints of God, cheer up! Three days from now I'm taking you out of here and I'm carrying you to the throne of God." Or, He could have gone down to hell, perhaps where those captive demon spirits were. The Apostles Creed says Jesus "descended into Hell." 4) It could refer to His descent into the experience of hell, even while He suffered on the cross. In Matt. 27:46 he cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Was He not experiencing hell, separation from God, on our behalf?

2. Christ Ascended to Heaven – The phrase "far above all heavens" could refer to the Jewish notion of different levels of heaven, whether 3 heavens or 7. It was a glorious time when Jesus went back to heaven. In Psalm 24 the Psalmist depicts the return of our Lord to heaven. He puts it this way: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up ye everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in." I can hear the call. "Who is this king of glory?" The answer is given, "The Lord of hosts, the Lord strong and mighty, he is the king of glory" (KJV). The gates of glory opened up and Jesus Christ went into heaven. He is our exalted master.¹

3. He Led Captivity Captive – This is stated in v.8. The Old Testament language pictures a recapture of prisoners of war analogous to the rescue of Lot when reclaimed by Abraham from the clutches of the predatory kings. Sinners who once were held captives by sin and Satan have now been taken captive by Christ. However, as we shall see, Paul may have had in mind the New Testament concept of a victory parade where prisoners of war were displayed in the victory parade.

4. He Gave Gifts to Men - Evidently, the giving of gifts from the spoils of battle was a common part of the victory celebration described here, and it was no less true when Jesus returned to heaven victoriously. Upon His triumphant return to His Father's house, He distributes gifts to His subjects, and Paul refers to this in vv. 7 & 11.² Christ, then, is represented as a

¹ Christ ascended "in order that He might fill all things." That is, that as a result of Christ's descent into Calvary's hell where He made atonement for sin, and of His subsequent resurrection and ascension, Christ, as the now exalted Mediator, fills the entire universe with "blessings" or, if one prefers, with "gifts," the very gifts which he had earned. That's so much better than when Jesus was on the earth. When Jesus walked on this earth, He voluntarily limited Himself so that He was at one place at one time. Now ascended far above all the heavens, this world is now a Christ-filled world. As a result of accomplished mediatorial work, He returned in triumph to heaven, in the full possession of salvation for His people.

² There is an important change in Paul's quotation. The One who ascended received gifts, but the apostle himself in

conqueror enriched by His victories and giving gifts to His people. The main thought in these four verses (7-10), then, is the bestowal of gifts by the ascended Christ. Because Jesus won the victory and ascended back to heaven, He has given His followers the gift of the Holy Spirit, and various spiritual gifts as well. Jesus said in John 16:7, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

If you are effective in some ministry, give all the praise and glory to Jesus, who has enabled you to be effective by granting you a spiritual gift. There's no place for pride in the ministry or the Christian life. Christ is the source of our giftedness.

Another resource for effective service is this:

B. Gifted Leaders Develop Your Spiritual Gifts - The gifts of Christ were not limited to spiritual gifts given to believers. But they include gifted men, as Paul states here. The enrichment of the church is by no means piles of brick and stone, however ornate or impressive they may be. The actual riches of the church are its leaders. Probably not too many churches realize their pastor is God's gift to that church. Some churches probably think their pastor is rather the "White Elephant Gift"! Yet where would the church be without gifted leaders?

God gave a series of prophets to His people Israel. Do you remember the saying, "The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha." This is God's true gift through the centuries. When one man lays a mantle down, there is another man to pick it up and carry it on.

1. Their Identity – In v.11 Paul identifies the primary gifted leaders of the church in his day:

a) Apostles - Paul first of all says He gave some apostles. Peter, John, Paul, and the other apostles were such blessings to the Church. The noun "apostle" means "a sent one." They received New Testament truth directly from God (3:5). This office of an apostle was a highly exalted one appointed directly by Christ. These specially-called spokesmen for God were missionaries in a peculiar sense in that they had to see the risen Lord and be sent by Him. Because of the very nature of the qualifications, this office could not be passed on to others. Some sects claim apostolic succession, but they are false apostles.

b) Prophets – The early church did not have the complete New Testament until the close of the first century. So the church needed the ministry of prophets. The New Testament prophets were men who received revelation from God for the time, and announced the same in power for the edifying of the body of Christ. Sometimes the prophet was a fore-teller of predictive prophecy; at other times he was a forthteller (preacher) of a divinely-revealed truth for the present, pertaining to doctrinal instruction (1 Cor. 14:3). They often followed up on the work of the apostles in a preaching ministry. Since the early church did not have a New Testament as we have it, they relied heavily upon the apostles and prophets to give them the Word of the Lord. There are neither apostles nor prophets today because the New Testament has been completed. Their work was to lay the foundation for the Church, as you can see in Eph. 2:20. Once you have laid the foundation, you do not add more foundation. It is then time to build on that foundation. As each soul is saved, we are building up God's church. The foundation has already been laid. We do not need apostles and prophets today.

c) Evangelists - Some people think that an evangelist is someone with 15 sermons and 15 suits. Others think of an evangelist as one who holds city-wide crusades. But an

referring to it here says that he gave gifts. But the Victor receives the spoils with a view to giving them away. The giving is implied in the receiving.

evangelist is gifted at spreading the good news of salvation through Christ, especially to those who have not yet heard the true gospel. They are a unique, out-of-the-ordinary love for lost people. An evangelist should bring new converts into the fellowship of a local church. They have a special gift in leading people to accept Christ as Savior. An evangelist should also train and motivate others to win people to Christ. We are not going to win very many to Christ relying on just a few to do this important work. Evangelism is essential to the growth of the Church, and the church needs evangelists. It is sad that the evangelist is not used by most churches today.

d) Pastor-Teachers - A rule in Greek grammar shows that the word “teacher” is just a further description of the word “pastor,” thus, Paul has in mind a pastor-teacher. A person occupying this office was both to shepherd (which is the idea in the word “pastor”) the flock of God, and to instruct them in divine truth. If you look at Acts 20:28 you can see that the pastor is to lead the flock and feed the flock. What Paul is saying here is that God has called and gifted certain men to shepherd and teach His people the Word of God, which according to 2 Tim. 3:16-17, is profitable for teaching, and reproof, and improvement, and for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, or mature and complete, thoroughly equipped for doing good works. There we see that one of the best ways I can equip you for the good work of serving God is to teach you the Word of God. Those of you who have been regular in attendance, I have seen most of you grow in your Christian faith. And that is one of my main jobs, to help you grow up in Christ. Whereas an evangelist will move around from field to field, a pastor has a more settled ministry.

The members of the church are to recognize these offices of gifted leaders, and pray for them, support them, and benefit from their ministry.

Speaking of their ministry, what are they to do? Well we see from our text not only their identity, but also:

2. Their Priority - A very important question to be answered is this, “Why did God give these gifted leaders to the church?” Has God called pastors to head up a social club? Has God called pastors to set up a counseling agency? No! One of the main reasons God gave these gifted men is found in v.12. It is “for the equipping of the saints....” The word translated “equipping” is used in Mt. 4:21 of mending nets. The word means to make complete, to qualify for usefulness. In 1 Th. 3:10 it refers to Paul overcoming and supplying the areas of lack in the believers’ lives. In Luke 6:40 it refers to a student learning what his teacher knows, and becoming more and more like his teacher. As we can see from this, God gave pastors and other called men to equip and qualify the saints to do something. My role, my responsibility, is to equip you with everything you need to effectively serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Based on this teaching, I want to ask you to do 2 things. First, you need to recognize the biblical role of pastors and other gifted leaders. Don’t expect us to fulfill a role that is not really biblical. Secondly, you need to sit under my teaching ministry, and take advantage of the times that Drew or I train and equip you to serve the Lord. I have offered witness training, deacon training, committee chairperson training, and a number of other training opportunities. Drew is to train youth leaders, and also train youth to be the next generation of workers in the church. Make sure you are taking advantage of the training opportunities we give.

So we have seen the reality of spiritual gifts, and the resources of spiritual gifts. Now let us consider together:

III. THE REASONS FOR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Why are we equipped with spiritual gifts? Why are we to be trained by pastors and other leaders? First of all:

A. To Enable Believers *to Minister* – Again, v.12 says that God has given pastors and other gifted leaders “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.” Every member should be equipped to be engaged in a definite “ministry” to others. You are not here just to be served. You are here to serve others.

Let me give you some examples of what I am talking about. There is something you do for the Lord Jesus Christ. It may be teaching a Sunday School class. It may be singing in the choir or some other aspect of our music ministry. It may be leading one of our organizations, or leading a class. God may have equipped you to be a lay counselor or encourager. Some are good at ministering those who are sick in body or soul. You may have a special prayer ministry. God is calling you to have a ministry. Now go out and do the work of your ministry. It may be just handing out gospel tracts during the week.

Who are to do this work of service? According to v.12, it is “the saints.” Who are the saints? Look back at 1:1. Paul was writing this letter “To the saints who are in Ephesus.” Clearly, he is writing to the whole church at Ephesus. All Christians are saints in the sense that all have been set apart unto God through the saving work of Jesus Christ. So Paul is referring to every believer, not just the so-called clergy. As “each one” has received a gift (v.7), so each one is to minister for the Lord in a local church. And look on down to v.16. There Paul says, “by which every part does its share....” So, God expects every believer to be involved in some form of Christian service. The Christian life is not simply attending church on Sunday and hearing a preacher preach and living a good life. There is much, much more. But too many seem to think that Sunday church is like a spectator sport. They think they can just come down on Sunday and watch the pros perform. They think they can just come down and see how the preacher did today. They think it’s the preacher’s job to do everything and they sit back and criticize everything that’s done. That’s not what the Bible teaches. I don’t do the work of the ministry on your behalf. My job is to equip you for the work of the ministry God has given you.

There are people who “shop” for a new church. For some, they are looking to find out what the church is going to do for them. Yet we should be more concerned about what we can do to support the ministry of the church.

We should be able to see from these verses that the pastor is to equip God’s people to do the ministry of the Lord, and not to try to do everything himself.

Now God has given you a spiritual gift and gifted leaders, not only that you may minister, but also:

B. To Build Up the Body of Christ – In the last of v.12 Paul says the saints are to be equipped for ministry “for the edifying of the body of Christ.” What is the Body of Christ? It is the Church. It is important for us to understand the meaning of the word edification. The verb form of that word simply means to build up. Here, it can be translated, “Unto the upbuilding of the body of Christ,” which is the church. When God’s people are involved in serving Christ, this results in the building up of Christ’s body. Each gifted believer should be eager to use their gift, not for his own glory and benefit, but for the benefit of the entire body.

There are two aspects of this building up of the body of Christ. When the saints are

servicing, using their spiritual gifts, there will be numerical growth. God wants churches to grow. He wants His kingdom to grow. What are you doing to help our church grow, and reach more people for Christ? Is there anyone in this church due to your influence and ministry? But based on what follows, the primary focus of Paul seems to be upon the spiritual growth of individual Christians. After all, if we are growing spiritually, we will also have numerical growth as well.

I found it very interesting to learn the literal meaning of the word translated in our text “edifying”. Its literal meaning is “To build a house.” [Tell of my childhood experience of watch men build houses]. We can learn something about how the body of Christ is built up by how we build a house. You know that when you build a house it takes many different workers. It takes carpenters, bricklayers, roofers, plumbers, electricians, and many other talents. And you know, not all are gifted in soul winning, not all can edify the church by a wonderful voice, not all have the gift of teaching. But each Christian can contribute to the strengthening of the body of Christ in some way. It takes all of God’s people to build a church to the glory of God.

Conclusion: It should be evident from our text that God never intended His work to be left in the hands of a few. There is a vast unused resource of laymen in our churches whom God could use to multiply His disciples across this nation and the world.

The saints of God in this church and in all our churches must realize our responsibility to God. This church will never fulfill God’s will without your help. As plain as I know how I have shown you that every born-again child of God should be active in some form of Christian service. God demands it and you must decide this day whether or not you will obey His voice and commit yourself to serve Him. Are you spectator or a participant? Are you a worker, or a watcher? Are you a contributor, or a complainer? Every member of this church needs to do their part to help this church. God can do something in this church that our modern age has never seen before. Remember, God gave pastors and others “for the purpose of equipping the saints unto a work of service unto the building up of the body of Christ.” It’s God’s way. Let’s do it His way!

Sources: W.A. Criswell, *Ephesians: an Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967); John MacArthur, Jr., *Study Notes on Ephesians 4:7-16* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1989); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); E. K. Simpson, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Lehman Strauss, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957)-p.175 only; Curtis Vaughan, *A Study Guide Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text dated 6/14/92); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich: Ephesians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Ephesians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

© Dr. Stephen Felker. These notes may be used and even shared for personal study or ministry, but not for commercial purposes. The author credits the sources listed above and footnotes for much of the content. The “live” recording of this sermon will be more completely in the author’s own words. To obtain an audio or video recording of this message, go to www.sermonaudio.com/pastorFelker, or go to www.SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com/Resources. Dr. Felker’s email address is S+Felker&2@aol.com (remove signs).