

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4

“7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. 8 Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.” 9 (Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) 11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

“The Equipping of the Saints”

Well it is time for us to move on from the seven unities or givens we have been studying: I trust we have seen the practical implications of knowing something of each of them, but always remembering that we celebrate all unity in light of diversity in the same way that we rejoice in the Triune Nature of Almighty God!

- We will see the same with another list of what has been given to edify us as Saints in Christ’s Church.
- Each is important but they are all united in bringing Glory to Christ through His Bride the Church.

Our morning reading began with, ““7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. 8 Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.”

The Apostle then speaks about ascending and descending which can be confusing if we don’t understand where Paul got the material he quoted *[yes, we are supposed to know our Bibles]*

That quotation comes from Psalm 68, which in turn is another recounting of God’s faithful care of His people, the Nation of Israel. Psalm 68 begins with “Let God arise, Let His enemies be scattered; Let those also who hate Him flee before Him. 3 But let the righteous be glad; Let them rejoice before God; Yes, let them rejoice exceedingly. 7 O God, when You went out before Your people, When You marched through the wilderness, 8 The earth shook; The heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel. *[the Exodus]* 16 Why do you fume with envy, you mountains of many peaks? This is the mountain which God desires to dwell in; Yes, the Lord will dwell in it forever. *[City of Jerusalem which is now the Bride of Jesus!]* 17 The chariots of God are twenty thousand, Even thousands of thousands; The Lord is among them as in Sinai, in the Holy Place. 18 You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts among men, Even from the rebellious, That the Lord God might dwell there. 19 Blessed be the Lord, Who daily loads us with benefits, The God of our salvation! 35 O God, You are more awesome than Your holy places. The God of Israel is He who gives strength and power to His people. Blessed be God!”

This should be seen as a glorious introduction to what follows which will be the focus of our study this morning: “11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry,…”

I wanted to take them together as those gifts to the Church in one message, but alas I don't think we will get past the first two this morning so the others will wait for next week. As we study them we must not forget the rest of the text which clearly tells us what those gifts are to be used for:

“12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

- There are some big challenges there & we will spend several weeks considering some or all of them.

But for this morning we begin with those gifts that were given, pointing out that this is not an exhaustive list but rather an illustrative one. For example deacon is not mentioned and yet we know that this is another gift to the Church given to us by God.

- So here we have five to consider and the first is Apostles!

We should all know who the first Apostles were, right? The twelve chosen by Jesus as His disciples, remembering of course that this group included Judas which reminds us again that we are saved by Grace and not our status!

Were those the only Apostles? No, because after Judas hanged himself, there was a discussion in Acts 1 about what to do with his vacancy and we again see the importance of knowing the Old Testament!

Acts 1: 15 And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, 16 “Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; 17 for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry...” 20 “For it is written in the Book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling place be desolate, And let no one live in it’; and, ‘Let another take his office.’” *[your homework can be looking at Psalm 69 & 109 which Peter quoted from to see the context there!]*

Luke writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit then tells us how Peter explains who can be an Apostle: 21 “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”

Two men are put forward and Matthias was chosen by lot and was numbered with the eleven apostles. So we are back to twelve, but that is not the end of the story because later we read this in Acts 14:14: But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude [in Lystra]”

We know that Paul was chosen as one born out of time to be the Apostle to the Gentiles and we have no account of Barnabas' selection. We know from Paul instructions that Apostle's could be easily recognized: 2 Corinthians 12:12 “Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.”

And just before that in 2 Corinthians 11 we learn that there were false apostles.

12 “But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. 13 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.”

- Thus it should be clear that we do not have Apostles with us today.
- There is no one who can claim to have been with Christ in His earthly ministry or be a direct witness of His resurrection.

So how about the next one on the list: Prophets: Do we have prophets today?

That depends on just how you define a prophet. The prophets in the Old Testament and those in the early church received direct revelations from God, which is why we have His Word with us today!

Since we must not add or take away from the Word of God we cannot have such prophets with us today. With that said you do have reference to prophets in the New Testament like Agabus who could foretell events and the daughters of James were called prophetesses.

I think this we have to leave in the category of miracles and healings where we know that the Holy Spirit can do whatever He wants to do at whatever point in history...

- But at the same time, we should not expect what we saw in the early days of the Church on a regular basis!

So I would argue that Paul's reference to Apostles and Prophets should be seen as the foundation that has been given:

- This is what the Apostle Paul has already taught us back in chapter 2:

Ephesians 2:19 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord."

The Apostle has a similar reference in

Ephesians 3: "4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, & sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

Those Apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the Church, the Bride of Jesus who would fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and we see this confirmed in Revelation 18 as the judgment of the Nation of Israel in AD 70 comes to a close:

"Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged her with the judgment she imposed on you."

With that said, here is one objection that could be raised:

The Apostle Paul teaches us that they are given to the Church for the edifying of the Saints.

- Well, I am a Saint and yet you tell me we have no Apostles or Prophets given to us today!

So is that a valid concern or objection? Asking and answering some simple questions can help us to understand where we stand today...

- Do we have any Apostles with us today?
- Yes we do, right here in the pages of the New Testament!
- Do we have any Prophets with us today?
- Yes we do, right here in the pages of the Old Testament!

Now that certainly points us to the Scriptures and that is my practical application for this morning!

And to remind us about just how important this application is I want to quickly return to the account of Lazarus and the rich man that we studied during our journey through Luke's Gospel account. [review the account]

The rich man makes a final request which takes us to the heart of the point that Jesus wants the Pharisees, and all of us, to learn!

Since Lazarus cannot come & comfort this rich man, he then requests that he be sent to his five brothers to warn them about what lies ahead for them... Abraham responds to his request by saying, "they have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them!" "NO Father Abraham" the rich man protests... Just reading the Bible is not enough...

"If one goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" Abraham then explains a truth that Jesus would dramatically demonstrate in just a few short weeks and applies to our lesson this morning:

"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

Let that sink in for a moment:

What would be the better way to bring a person to Christ? To hand them a Bible and suggest that they read the Gospel of John or to raise one of their friends from the dead?

What answer does Abraham give to the rich man?

We should remember the blessing we have right here between THESE covers... Moses and the Prophets!

BUT surely God has not entrusted His grand salvation to just a Book!

Sadly this is what many think today looking for experiences, outreaches or other ways to communicate the Gospel. This is what the rich man was appealing to for his brothers...

- **They don't need the Bible, they need something to get their attention!**
- **Someone coming back from the dead would certainly "work."**

Jesus teaches that even raising one from the dead cannot soften hardened hearts, just as He would demonstrate after He raised His friend Lazarus from the dead. Did those rebellious Jews have a change of heart?

No, they simply said they would have to now kill both Jesus and Lazarus!

Now I hope you can see why asking for or even demanding personal Apostles or Prophets for our day is very wrong.

- **We have the Apostles and the Prophets right here!**

So let me make this a bit more practical for us...

IF I told you that the King David was going to return tomorrow morning and wanted to meet with you at your home around 7:30, to share some important truths for your life.

- **Would you be interested?**
- **Would you be up and alert and ready for his visit?**

Well, I can't make such a promise, but I do have the new calendar for August on the Table!

It contains suggested readings from the Book of Psalms, many of which were written by King David. God not only wants us to hear what he has to say but promises that His Spirit will guide us into all truth. Do you see the point?

Whether you use our suggested readings, which I use along with a chapter from the Old and New Testaments each day...

Or use any of the other Bible study methods, the important point is to be in the Word, so the Apostles & Prophets can speak to us, and edify us!

- Being a person of the Word might seem old and trite, but if you are not a person of the Word I can assure you the world the flesh and devil will have their way with you!

God offers Apostles and Prophets for our edification and blessing just as he has always done for His people, echoed in the final words of Moses!

Deuteronomy 30:15 "See, I have set before you today [and every day if you have a Bible!] life and good, death and evil, 16 in that I command you today to love Jehovah your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and Jehovah your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, 18 I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live..."

- Let us listen to the Apostles & Prophets which God by His Grace has given to the Church to edify the Saints.

Communion Meditation: II Chronicles 30

“¹³ Now many people, a very great assembly, gathered at Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the second month. ... ¹⁷ For *there were* many in the assembly who had not ^[g]sanctified themselves; therefore the Levites had charge of the slaughter of the Passover *lambs* for everyone *who was not clean*, to sanctify *them* to the LORD. ¹⁸ For a multitude of the people, many from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the good LORD provide atonement for everyone ¹⁹ *who prepares his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he is not cleansed* according to the purification of the sanctuary.” ²⁰ And the LORD listened to Hezekiah and healed the people.”