

STRONGER TOGETHER IN UNITY

A SERMON

DELIVERED ON THE SABBATH MORNING OF JANUARY 9TH, 2022 BY

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AT THE SHORE CHURCH, NORTH VANCOUVER

Our message this morning is broken the message down into four main points. First We have been given extra grace on top of His saving grace. Second, we like Paul, take a detour to look at Christ's ascending and descending. Third we look at various roles which God has given to equip the church for ministry. And finally we look at how we practically grow up into mature Christians. Our text is Ephesians 4:1–16.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

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

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.)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:1–16

When we think about ‘grace’ we generally start with the concept of God’s ‘saving grace’. In chapter 1 of Ephesians Paul has already told us that, ...in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace... (Ephesians 1:7). And then in chapter 2 we were reminded that, even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace [we] have been saved... (Ephesians 2:5–7). So through God’s grace, we were made alive in Christ, having had our sins, past, present and future forgiven. But here in chapter 4 we read about a new kind of grace, But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. (Ephesians 4: 7). This special type of grace is given to each of us. Not based on our gifting, but on the measure Christ has determined for us. But what is this special kind of grace? Like saving grace it is a free gift, undeserved and unearned. But unlike saving grace, which is equal for each of us, this grace is apportioned to us in differing amounts. But what is clear, is that each one of us has received this grace. Having just come out of Christmas, it’s easy to remember just how exciting it was to receive a gift. But unless I’m mistaken, I’m sure you would all agree that giving a gift is even for exciting than receiving one. Especially if that person is really excited to receive it. Their pleasure and excitement brings us even more happiness. So think how much God must love us to not only save us through the death of His only Son but to also give gifts to each one of us. Each gift has been specially picked to be perfect for us, and to be used to bring Him glory and to build up His body.

In Romans 12 we read, For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us... (Romans 12:3–6). These gifts of grace are not given to us for our benefit, as Paul tells us, but for the building up of the whole church.

As we move to onto our second point, we see in verse 8 that Paul takes a breath and puts a side note in the margin of his letter. 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.). (Ephesians 4:8–10). These verses are initially difficult to interpret and can be confusing for sure. Here Paul is talking about Christ ‘ascending’ and ‘descending’. ‘Ascending on high’, and ‘descending into the lower regions’.

Although in this message we’re not going to get into the details of what’s going on, it’s probably useful just to say that the ‘ascending’ relates to Christ ascending into Heaven at the end of His Earthly ministry. Luke tells us, And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy... (Luke 24:50–52). While the ‘descended’ relates to Christ coming from Heaven to Earth, as we celebrate at Christmas time. Jesus spoke of this in the gospel of John when he said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. (John 6:35–38). However the key thing we need to take away from this section is the ‘giving of gifts to men’. Paul wants to emphasize that Christ not only saved us, but has entrusted us with gifts for the building up of the church.

In our third point we see in verses 11 and 12 Paul lists a number of specific roles or ‘offices’ which are used to served the church. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... (Ephesians 4:11–12). Before we get into the details of this section, I just wanted to clarify my uses of the word ‘office’. What I mean by this is a ‘public position that individuals hold in the church’ as opposed to a ‘gifting’ many people may have. So you could have the ‘office of Evangelist’ which may be just one person in the church and is recognized by the church. And you could have the ‘gift of Evangelism’, as a Gift of the Spirit, which many people may have, but without official recognition. In this section of scripture, Paul is focusing more on the gift of an ‘office’ not so much on the ‘spiritual’ gift. However I am going to talk about both as I feel it would be helpful to us.

So Paul talks about four types of ‘offices’, the gift of Apostles, the gift of Prophets, the gift of Evangelists, and The gift of Shepherds and Teachers. These gifts are given specifically by God for the building up of His body, the church. I’m going to argue that out of this list, ‘Apostles’ with a capital ‘A’ are no longer active, and ‘Prophets’ with a capital ‘P’ are to be thought of very differently today as to those we read about in the Old Testament. In fact the Apostles of the New Testament replace the Prophets of the Old Testament. However the gifts of Evangelists, and Shepherds & Teachers are very much the same today as they were in the first century.

Let's start with the Office of Apostles. Just like the word 'office' it's worth me defining what is meant by the role of the 'Apostle'. In the New Testament, the three qualifications given to a first century Apostle, including, having seen Jesus after his resurrection with one's own eyes - thus, being an 'eyewitness of the resurrection'. ...I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:1-3). And with regards to Paul, who became a believer after Jesus has ascended the bible says, Now as he [Saul] went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. (Acts 9:3-5). Having been specifically commissioned by Christ as His Apostle. In the book of Matthew we read, And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these... These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "... proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" (Matthew 10:1-2 and 7). Having the authority to speak and write God's very words. ...I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles... (2 Peter 3:1-2). Given these criteria I would suggest the the role of an Apostle, as we see in the New Testament, is no longer a gifting available today. However, some people today do use the word 'apostle' in a broad sense, such as referring to a 'church planter' or a 'missionary'. In some church denominations they would refer to someone in these roles as an 'apostle' but with a small 'a', to make the distinction from New Testament Apostles. However, the danger of declaring yourself an 'apostle', even with a small 'a' is that it would suggest a higher level of authority than is appropriate for church leaders today. It may be better to avoid confusion by just using different words, such as simply a 'church planter' or 'missionary'. In saying all this though, the gift of 'Apostle' was given to the early church, and we continue to receive their blessing through the reading of Scripture which many of them wrote.

The next Office Paul talks about is that of the Prophet. When Paul talks about giving us Prophets we must understand what he is saying alongside his other letters, In 1 Corinthians 14 he says, Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ...the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement...earnestly desire to prophesy... (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3 and 39). In the New Testament we don't so much see individual Prophets, like we did in the Old Testament, but more a gift of prophecy which is given to the church through different members. When we think of the Old and New Testament, with regards to the gift of prophecy we see two very different pictures. In the Old Testament, prophecy is the very word of God. When a prophet spoke it was not up for negotiation or assessment, it was God's very word. Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets...(Hebrews 1:1). So it was from God, to the Prophet, to the people. And if a Prophet spoke and it was deemed to be incorrect the Prophet was to be stoned to death.

However in the New Testament the word 'Prophet' is the same, but the means something quite different. It's similar in the sense that it's God's voice speaking, but it's different in that it's recognized as partial, open to error, and without the authority of Old Testament Prophecy. For we know in part and we prophesy in part... (1 Corinthians 13:9). Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. (1 Corinthians 14:29-30). In the Old Testament you would never say to a Prophet, "hey, be quiet it's my turn now!". So an Old Testament Prophet and New Testament prophet are quite different. And it's important to note that all the references to the 'gift of prophecy' in the New Testament are based in and around the gathered church, like we are this morning. This enables the prophecy to be examined and weighed by others. So prophecy today never starts with "Thus says The lord" but more, "I just sensed the Lord wants to say to us this morning that He knows some of us are hurting and he is with us and loved us. His strength is made perfect in our weakness." Or "I just sensed God wanted to remind us of Deuteronomy 31: 6".

The third Office which Paul talks about is that of Evangelist. This is a gift which feels very similar today, to when Paul wrote it. As a reminder, Paul is talking more about the 'Office of an Evangelist' than the 'Spiritual Gift of Evangelism' but we'll cover both just for clarity. The term 'Evangelist' comes from a Greek word which means 'Messenger' or 'one who preaches the gospel'. As with prophecy, many people may possess the 'Gift of Evangelism' but some have a more special, distinctive gifting. They may fulfill that role within their local church, or move about from place to place. Billy Graham or Chuck Colson would be excellent examples of this role of preaching the gospel from town to town.

In all of this however, we are all called to evangelize whether we have the Office, Spiritual Gift, or neither. Jesus is clear when he said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). Although the bible is clear that God saves through the illumination of the Spirit in people's hearts, it is our job to present the good news of salvation to them through the Gospel. I think like me many people are fearful of sharing the gospel, however the thought of someone being saved through my witness is one of the most exciting things imaginable. So wherever we stand in gifting, let us not make excuses, but encourage each other and get out there and share our faith with our families, friends, and co-workers.

Finally we get to the Office of Shepherds and Teachers. Some people would argue these are two separate Offices but I'm convinced Paul is talking about one role. The word 'Shepherd' in Greek denotes that of a 'church leader', an Elder, Overseer, or as we see here, Shepherd. This role is to protect, lead, care for and Feed (or teach) the local church. The Bible is clear that the ability to teach or preach is an essential gifting for a church leaders, Paul wrote to Timothy saying, Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Timothy 4:11–13). And to Titus Paul said, He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9). Like the other Offices of Apostle, Prophet, and Evangelist, our Elders are given to the church as a gift, to protect, lead, care for and teach us God's word.

These four Offices are given to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry. For building up the body of Christ. Church should not be like a hockey game, with 20 or so players doing all the work and 19,000 spectators watching from the stands. Instead we should think of the church as the actual hockey team itself the players are the congregation, the church. The Shepherds and Teachers are the coaches. The Evangelists are out promoting the game. And the Apostles and Prophets bring stability through God's word and encouragement and comfort to the players. Finally the spectators are our unbelieving friends, family members, coworkers, etc. This is the body of Christ working properly.

Finally we come to our fourth point in which Paul concludes his thoughts by saying now Christ has given us these different Offices to equip and build up the church until, ...we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:12b–16). First Paul goes back to his topic of ‘unity’ which we heard about from Jer last week. Paul is calling the church to be united based on our salvation through Christ Jesus. We are not to be divided by crafty deceitful schemes of the enemy. When we are not in unity with each other, Paul goes so far as to call us immature and children. He exhorts us to maturity in Christ. That we would grow up in the knowledge of the Son of God and put childish ways behind us. The way we are to avoid the deceitful schemes of the enemy is to know God is truth through the pages of scripture. Over the last few years the enemy has employed various tactics to drive us away from God’s word.

How many of us endlessly scroll through Facebook or Twitter looking for the latest news or worldly wisdom. Or spend time looking up endless statistics on Covid so we can appear more informed than our friend who has a different view than us. This isn’t bringing unity to the church or growing us into mature christians. This year let’s spend more time in God’s word than in Facebook. Let us read of the great Christian saints who have gone before us, instead of investing hours reading through worldly news. Half an hour studying the bible at a more in-depth level will feed our souls so much more than an hour or two watching random YouTube videos. This growth and maturity will bring strength and wisdom not only to us as individuals but also to our church as a whole. As we know more of God’s word we will become more stable, not being so easily persuaded by the world. I don’t know about you but I love the ocean. But stuck on a boat in rough seas very quickly makes me sick. And when I’m sea sick I can think of nothing but the toing and froing of the waves. I am incapable of thinking straight, and before long I’m just sitting in a corner just praying for it to stop. This is what the world seeks to do to us. It’s fills our mind with deceitfulness and fear, turning us against each other. Causing our focus to stray further and further from the cross and more and more towards worldly wisdom. But, ...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us... (Romans 8:37).

Instead let us speak and act in love to each other, even if we don't fully agree with them. Yes we will have different perspectives on many things, from doctrine to how we raise our children, from how we think the church should be run to whether we should wear masks. But in all things, God is calling us to unity. And remember, God is not calling us to 'uniformity', where we all think the same, but 'unity', where even in our differences we love each other and seek to build up the church into the image of Christ. Last week we were reminded to, ...walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3). When you read that list of attributes - humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity and peace - what does it remind you of? It reminds me of Jesus and especially how He acts towards me. Thank goodness He is gentle and patient with me. Constantly loving me when I sin over and over again. Bringing peace to my life even in the worst of moments. If Jesus can be this way with us, given our sin against Him, how much more should we be kind and loving towards each other. Paul finishes this section by describing the church in the form of a human body, with Christ as the head, and us as the rest of the body. We are held together by Christ but each of us has a part to play. If just one part of the body is not united, the whole body is weak. Let us grow up into Christ. Let us put away childish thinking. And let us become mature, living in unity and love together.

So in summary, we are called to bear with one another in love, and to maintain the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace. Christ has given us gifts to equip the church for works of ministry, and through them we are to grow in our knowledge of Jesus, which will result in maturity. We are to speak to one another in love and truth, and in doing so the church will become healthy and work properly. All of this is done through God's amazing grace. We are saved by His grace alone. And we are strengthened by His grace alone. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Roman 8:1). Christ is madly in love with His bride and through the power of the Holy Spirit we are growing up into all He has for us. Let us remember that Christ, gave himself up for [us], that he might sanctify [us], having cleansed [us] by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is all of grace. Let us simply get in step with the Spirit. Love each other despite our differences. And live in the unity that Christ's death has made possible.