

49-04-01-The Return Gifts

Christ's ascension, spiritual gifts, lay ministry

Eph 4:7-16

Christ gifted His people to carry on His mission until He gets back.

INTRODUCTION: (Text as Scripture Reading)

–The Apostles Creed affirms our biblical belief that Jesus “*ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*”

But when He left, He commissioned His disciples to carry on the work He began – John 20:21b, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”– by leaving, He did not intend for His ministry to stop: **HOM.idea.**

–How will His mission continue? Our **text** describes how– v.7, *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. As God’s power enabled Christ’s ministry, so God’s grace is given to us to continue it.*

–[At going-away parties, we often give gifts to those leaving.] Jesus reversed the direction!– v.8, *This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”* Paul’s language describes the *return of a military conqueror*. Let’s see why Paul uses this illustration....

I. The Enemy Strongholds Are in Shambles– v.8-10, *This is why it says:*

“When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”
(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

A. This was an OT prophecy [quoted from LXX]– Psa 68:18 (LXX), *Thou art gone up on high, thou hast led captivity captive, thou hast received gifts for man, yea, for they were rebellious, that thou mightest dwell among them.* – (LSG, my trans.), *You have ascended the heights, you have brought along captives, you have taken men as gifts; rebels also will dwell near the Lord God.* – (JB), *God, you have ascended to the height, and captured prisoners, you have taken men as tribute, yes, taken rebels to your dwelling, Yahweh!*

B. It portrays Christ as a warrior-king’s returning victorious from battle with hostages and spoils for his kingdom ... it says...

1. (NKJ), *He led captivity captive* - (NASB), *He led captive a host of captives:*
 - a. First, he conquered those who held us captive (His death and resurrection defeated Satan and his demonic host– Col 2:15, And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.)
 - b. Then, He ascended victorious over the ultimate human captor–

Rev.1:18, I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

2. *it says... He gave gifts to men* (the spoils of His battle on the cross):
 - a. This was prophesied– Isa 53:12, Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.
 - b. Jesus described it– Luke 11:21-22, When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. (What God wanted us to have and Satan’s lies kept us from enjoying, are now ours in Christ.)
- C. This understanding of Christ’s ascension displays our destiny–
 1. By His descent (identifying Himself with the human condition through incarnate servanthood, painful death, and the grave).
 2. And by His ascent (with resurrection victory over our captors):
 - a. “*higher than all the heavens*” (far above the angelic realm)
 - b. “*to fill the whole universe*”– Jesus is leading us to *man’s final frontier* [Star Trek motto: “*to boldly go where no man has gone before*”]

TRANS: Christ's major victory over sin and death and hell spells defeat to Satan. The deciding battle has been won by our Lord, but **He has left us and gifted us to carry on His mission until He returns.**

II. The Warrior-Training Team Is Now in Place...

- A. God has given a training team to the church– v. 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 (often called the 5-fold ministry):
 1. *apostles* = “*sent ones*” (missionary work; church planting)
 2. *prophets* = “*God’s spokesmen; seers*” (exhorting; predicting)
 3. *evangelists* = “*announcing good news*” (Gospel preaching)
 4. *pastors* = “*shepherds*” (protecting, feeding, leading)
 5. *teachers* = instructors (making the truth understandable)
- B. This team’s job is to equip God’s people– v.12, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up
 1. [“Every member a minister!”– v.7, *to each one of us grace has been given*]
 2. A local church’s spiritual growth and vitality is dependent on its membership’s response to the work of the equipping team.)
- C. God uses this equipping process for two major goals– v.13, *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become*

mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. First,

1. No group survives long in disunity. (God isn't after *uniformity*; in our *diversity*, He wants us to reach unity, or *unanimity*...
 - a. ...in believing the truth about Christ (This is *creedal unity*.)
 - b. ...in experiencing Him personally (*knowing His presence* in us)
2. God's other goal is for us to become mature spiritually, reaching our potential of growth into the fullness of Christ.

TRANS: Martin Luther called individual Christians "little Christs."

That may be true, but God's goal for us is *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. What will it look like as we grow up in Him?*

III. Will the Real Ministers Please Stand Up! (*God wants us all...*)

- A. To grow up in our commitment to the truth, v.14. *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. (Children are easily misled, so God gave parents to families and shepherds to churches. But in both institutions, He wants the young to grow up and learn to stand up on their own.)*
- B. To grow up in sharing truth lovingly, v.15. *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. (For growth in Christ, truth is the best food. But God wants it served on a platter of love, NOT thrown at each other!)*
- C. To grow up in the work of the serving, v.16. *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. [The 1st murderer asked a revealing question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Today some ask a similar question: "Isn't that the minister's job?"] (God's gift of the 5-fold ministry was to equip believers to be gifts to others, ministering to each other.)*

CONCLUSION:

–Believers can't rely on *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers* to do the *works of service* that God is calling them personally to do. **Christ gifted His people to carry on His mission until He gets back.** Pray for us as we try, as Paul said, "*to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*" And pray for each other to be the gifts God wants you to be in ministering to one another.

Ephesians 4:7-16 (NIV)

7But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.
8This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

9(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?

10He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

11It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,

12to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

13until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

15Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

16From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.