

"God's Gift to the Church" – Ephesians 4:7-16

I can honestly say that my tenure here as the pastor of Canyon Community Church has been a wonderful experience. You have been a tremendous blessing to Kris and me. As you've heard me say before, if we have managed to bless this church and this community one tenth as much as we have been blessed, our ministry here will have been a success.

But the time for our retirement is approaching. More than anything else, I want to finish well. So, I've been praying that the Lord would reveal to me exactly what He wants me to share in the sermons I have yet to preach.

You know I am committed to expository preaching. I always want to follow the pattern set forth in Nehemiah 8:8. Read distinctly from the Word, give the sense, and help you understand the meaning. My ideas are worth little or nothing, But this Bible contains the very word of God and it will make you complete and fully equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16=17)

At the same time, I feel led to prepare our church for a transition in pastoral leadership. God has already determined the pastor, the couple, the family who will serve here next. I don't know who it is going to be. Village Missions doesn't yet know who it is going to be. But whoever it is, they will be God's sovereign choice to provide pastoral leadership to this church and this community. The one thing I do know is that the next pastor will not be ... me. He will have a different personality. He will have different strengths. And yes, he will have some shortcomings, but they will be different from my shortcomings.

But here's the thing, the next Pastor is going to be God's gift to this church. His wife will be God's gift to this church. And because it is probably not prudent for a pastor to begin his ministry in a new community by saying, "I'm God's gift to this church.", I'm going to say it for him. Or rather, I'm going to let the Bible say it for him.

And that brings me to Ephesians, chapter 4.

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVITY CAPTIVE, AND GAVE GIFTS TO MEN." (Ephesians 4:7-8)

Paul is quoting from Psalm 68:18. It probably reads a little differently in your Bibles because he's using the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Our Bibles are translated from the Hebrew. But the meaning is still clear. Jesus is in the gift-giving business. These are gifts of grace. They are not given because we deserve them. We don't deserve them. But Jesus gives them to us anyway.

The greatest gift Jesus gives is Himself. He came to Earth to live that perfect, sinless life and then He sacrificed His life on the cross to purchase our salvation. To receive the gift of salvation, all you need to do is believe it belongs to you. Confess the fact you are a sinner in need of salvation. Believe Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sin. Submit to His Lordship. And believe that He was raised from the dead.

All of that takes faith, which is the second greatest gift Jesus gives you. You wouldn't come to Jesus on your own. You wouldn't even want to believe. But Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit transforms your will so you can believe.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So, if you want to be saved; if you want to believe, just ask Jesus for the faith to believe. I heard of a guy who once said, “I don’t think I really believe in Jesus. I’m not sure I even want to believe. But I want to want to believe.”

Even that tiny kernel of faith is a gift from above. If that’s you, ask Jesus for more faith. He’ll give it to you.

Verses 9 and 10 comprise a parenthesis. Paul is stepping away from his main point to add a little explanation. You might call it a brief rabbit trail.

*(Now this, "HE ASCENDED"—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)
(Ephesians 4:9-10)*

This is just a little doctrinal point. And some theologians try to make it way more difficult than it should be. What Paul is saying is simply this: Jesus has always been God the Son, existing in glory from eternity past. Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth when He became a man. He greatly humbled Himself. He gave up His glory in heaven. He was born a babe in a manger. He grew and learned and was tempted in every way we are tempted, except He didn’t sin. He died, but then He was resurrected and after 40 days He ascended to the right hand of the Father. That’s our Jesus!

Here are some other gifts Jesus gives to His Church. By the way, the Church is not a building. You know that, don’t you? So, when I say Jesus gives gifts to His Church, He is giving these gifts to all of you, because you are the Church.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, (Ephesians 4:11)

Now, we’re getting down to it. Apostles and prophets completed their work almost 2,000 years ago. This Bible is the result of their work. This is the Apostolic witness. It contains everything we need to know if we are to live a godly, Christian life. This Bible points us to Jesus; it is Christocentric. Jesus gave these folks to the Church so that they could give the Bible to us.

And He also gave evangelists. Now, this one is a little murky, because every Christian should be an evangelist. Every Christian should be a witness for the Gospel, with your lifestyle and with your testimony. You should be willing to tell folks the wonderful things God has done for you. As Peter says,

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; (1 Peter 3:15)

But there are individuals who have been given a special gift for evangelism. The Reverend Billy Graham certainly had the gift of evangelism. But every pastor should be willing to do the work of an evangelist. Every Christian should be willing to do the work of an evangelist. Evangelists are God’s gifts to the Church.

This morning, though, I want to focus on the next gift to the Church, because Jesus gave some to be pastors and teachers. This is actually one office: pastor/teacher. And this is the office to which I have been called during this season of my life. Fairly soon, you will meet another guy who has been called to be your pastor and teacher. He will be Christ’s gift to this church.

Now, how are we going to accept this gift?

“Oh, thanks Jesus, but I was really hoping for something else.”

I sure hope not. We need to receive every gift Jesus gives with a spirit of profound thanksgiving. To do anything else is to dishonor our Savior. Remember, we don't deserve any of His gifts.

But we can expect some things from our next pastor because the Bible gives us his job description. And frankly, I think it is okay to gently remind a pastor of this job description from time to time. But more often, I think congregations need to be reminded of what the pastor's job is. Because sometimes, congregations set unrealistic, unbiblical expectations.

Jesus gave some to be pastors and teachers ...

for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, (Ephesians 4:12)

Look at this carefully. Who is to do the work of ministry? The saints. That is you, and you and you and you. If you are a Christian, then you are His sanctified one, His saint. And yes, it is the pastor too, because he certainly is one of Jesus' flock. But the pastor's specific job is to equip the saints, so they can do the work of ministry.

Now, this is one reason I have really been blessed here at Canyon Community Church. We do have many saints who are equipped and who do the work of the ministry. I don't have to be concerned that the chapel is prepared for Sunday morning worship. I don't have to worry about setting up communion on the first Sunday of the month. I don't have to worry about Sunday School because we have men who teach Sunday School. We have men and women who teach Children's Church. We have women and men who visit the sick, who provide food, who take of the prayer chain and the calendar, who shop for supplies in the Ed. Building. We are in good shape financially because you have been faithful in giving. You love on one another, and that is so encouraging. We have a church board that is unified, and they are faithful stewards of the resources God has given us.

We could still do better. I could do a better job of equipping you for the work of the ministry. I think I could do better to encourage more of you to enroll in the Contenders classes, because that is exactly what they are designed to do. (Yes, that is a plug for the next class that will be starting shortly.)

But still, I am very grateful. I know Village Missions Pastors who are beaten down to the point of burn-out because they are trying to do all the work of ministry themselves. Those guys are sinning. They are not being obedient to the scriptural exhortation. And their congregations are sinning too.

Because the goal of ministry is the edification of the Church. Churches need to grow. Now, it's nice when they grow numerically. It is a tremendous blessing when unbelievers become believers and join the body of Christ. But more than that, we need to grow in spiritual maturity. We need to learn more about Jesus, to draw closer to Him, to understand what He wants of us, to be conformed to His perfect will. That's what edifies, what builds up the Church.

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; (Ephesians 4:13)

Now that, my friends, is a high bar. But that is the goal. That is what we all must be striving for, to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Remember, He was the only

perfect Man. No local church in history has achieved this ideal. Nobody has been able to say, “Hey, we made it! We reached the goal! We don’t have to work anymore.”

No! We must continue to labor together because we are not there yet. Canyon Community Church is not yet perfect. We are not fully edified and there is always a danger that we will be distracted from our holy purpose. It’s why Paul continues:

... 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, (Ephesians 4:14)

You know that we have spiritual enemies, don’t you? Satan doesn’t want us to follow Jesus. Unbelievers want us to conform to the world’s system. And our sin nature is always trying to trip us up.

But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:13)

We need to be guardians of the truth. You need to know what this Bible says and you need to know what it means so that you are not deceived and carried about by false teaching.

but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—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. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

There are a bunch of sermons in these two verses, but I’m running out of time this morning. I’ve been pointing out gifts that Jesus gives us: Salvation, faith, the Apostolic witness, evangelists, pastor-teachers. This certainly isn’t an exhaustive list because ...

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. (James 1:17)

But before I close, I want to point out one more gift Jesus gives to this church.

You!

You are God’s gift to this church. That’s what Paul is talking about. The whole body is joined and knit together by what every joint supplies. The body grows when every part does its share. Every one of you is vitally important to Jesus and every one of you is vitally important to Canyon Community Church.

The Lord has given us everything we need to make the upcoming pastoral transition a glorious success. But every one of us needs to do his or her share. We need you, every one of you. We need your prayers. We need your expertise. And yes, we’re going to continue to need your labor.

Please, please, pray for me as I do my best to equip the saints for the work of ministry. But praise God, Jesus will be with us every step of the way!

He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:24)