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## The Gifts for Unity

### Ephesians 4:7-13

**Intro:** We are making our way through the practical half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. As we've seen, the 1<sup>st</sup> half deals with doctrine while the 2<sup>nd</sup> half consists of instructions on how Christians are to live in light of that doctrine. Paul's main focus in this section of **ch4 (1-16)** is for believers to walk in unity. He lists 5 characteristics that reflect a walk in unity (**2-3**) and then he lists 7 basic spiritual realities that unite all true Christians together (**4-6**). These 7 realities are so powerful and so common to every believer that they override all differences we may have with each other as well as supercede all relationships we may have with all non-believers, even those of our own blood.

So, the apostle Paul has taken great pains to stress the unity that the Holy Spirit has provided to the church. Yet, as we briefly noted in our last study, this is a particular kind of unity; a unity that allows for and even requires a great diversity. What comes to mind when you hear of the word "unity" in relation to the church? What do you think of? Some automatically think of a large organizational structure, the dominant model of many main-line denominational churches. It's a governmental model in which unity comes from the submission of each of the individual parts to authorities. Others think of unity as some kind of conformity in which each Christian is supposed to be the exact boring copy of every other. These are human concepts of unity but the unity the Bible speaks of is completely different.

The unity Paul speaks of in **4-6** is a unity consisting of common spiritual experience and common spiritual identity and is for all Christians because the one God is Father of all and is over all and through all and in all. And yet, no sooner has Paul spoken of this common unity than he immediately goes on to speak of diversity in the area of gifts (**7, 11**). The great contrast between **4-6** and **7, 11** is seen in the words "all" and "each" or "some." All believers are members of the one body and each have received gifts, but some have received one gift and some another.

We find this same truth expressed every where Paul speaks about spiritual gifts. We see it clearly in **1 Cor 12:4-6**. After mentioning several spiritual gifts,

Paul then adds in v11, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.” Rom 12:4-6a says virtually the same thing. It seems that whenever Paul mentions or lists the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they always appear in the context of their use in maintaining the unity of the Body.

These various texts provide us with a model for church unity which, again, is not that of a well-oiled organization or of identically manufactured objects, but of a body—a body containing diverse but essential and contributing parts. Without the things all Christians share—the common experience of their being joined to Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit—there is no church at all. But at the same time, without a diversity of gifts the church is not healthy and cannot function completely, any more than a body can function completely without arms or legs.

7 – Many commentators consider this section the heart of the book, for they tell how the Body of Christ is to function. They talk about gifts, and they begin by telling us that these gifts have come from Christ. They’re Christ’s gifts to His church, and He hasn’t overlooked anyone in the distribution. Even within the context of our diversity we see divine unity at work in that every believer has the common experience of receiving a spiritual gift from the Lord.

The Lord has given to each believer at least one spiritual gift but we must also make a distinction between spiritual gifts and natural abilities. When we are born, God gives us certain natural abilities, be it in mechanics, music, art, athletics, etc. In this regard, not all humans are created equal because some are smarter in some areas or stronger or more talented than others. Of course, natural ability must be augmented with training, practice, experience and hard work and like spiritual gifts; these abilities are given for the purpose of bringing glory to God.

But, in the spiritual realm, each believer has at least one spiritual gift no matter what natural abilities they may or may not possess. A spiritual gift is a God-given ability to serve God and other believers in such a way that God is glorified believers are edified and the church is unified. How does the believer discover and develop their spiritual gift? This can only happen when we fellowship with other believers in the local assembly. Spiritual gifts are given to enable us to serve so the only way to discover your particular

gift is to start serving. Remember, spiritual gifts are not given to make our service easy; they're given to make our service possible and pleasing to the Lord. Much can be done in the church through the power of natural ability and much has been but that only serves to bring glory to the servant. Seeking to operate in the power of your spiritual gifting brings glory to God.

Of course, the basis for God's distribution of spiritual gifts through His church is grace: the free, unmerited giving of God. No one deserves a spiritual gift and certainly, no one has earned one. They are given by God's grace as He wills. Paul does tell us in **1 Cor 12** that we should earnestly desire the best gifts but desire is a far cry from deserve and is not even in the same ball park as demand. Some believers reveal their ignorance of Scripture by demanding certain gifts from the Lord. Spiritual gifts are not toys to play with; they are tools to build with and, if they are not used in love, they can become weapons to fight with, which is what was happening in the Corinthian church. It's a shame that these spiritual gifts, which were given to promote unity in the church, have instead, through scriptural ignorance, been allowed to cause so much bitter division within the church.

**8-10** – It seems strange that at this point in his teaching Paul would digress here to cite an obscure OT passage but that's not what's happening at all. Paul actually pulls this text from **Ps 68:18** to make his point not to digress from it. With a better understanding of the context of the verse it's easier to see what he has in mind as he describes Jesus giving these gifts. **Ps 68** is a psalm of triumph, of victory, probably written in celebration of the bringing of the ark of God (symbolizing God's presence) to Jerusalem. It pictures God as having been victorious over His and Israel's enemies and then of ascending to His throne to receive gifts and homage from all men. By citing this psalm Paul puts the Lord Jesus Christ into that role, thereby affirming His deity. On the cross He defeated His and our enemies, and He has now ascended triumphantly to the right hand of the Father from where He now *dispenses* the gifts about which this section speaks. The image here refers to Christ's rule, authority, and power in the Christian church.

You may've noticed that Paul doesn't quote Ps 68: 18 verbatim and some are disturbed by that. **Ps 68:18** says "You have received gifts from among men" while Paul says (referring to the ascended Christ) "gave gifts to men." Of course, Paul didn't just change a word; he changed the whole theology of the passage. **Ps 68** was written about the God of Israel while Paul uses it to

refer to Jesus Christ. We normally don't choke on such a drastic change as this since we understand that the OT points forward to its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. But, if we drop down to 35b we see the God of Israel empowering His people through His gifts. Thus Paul's quote isn't a misquote but rather a cleverly economic rewording of the gist of the entire chapter. He's not just quoting one verse; he's giving us the entire narrative movement of the psalm. Paul knows his OT!

Now, there are 2 points worth stressing about Christ's dispensing these gifts. 1<sup>st</sup>, if they're given by Jesus, then they are to be used for the purposes for which He gave them, namely, the service and edification of the church. They are not to be used for selfish ends, not for drawing attention to the personality or programs of the ones using them. We have seen this too much in the church over the years and it somehow always ends up as a black eye for the church.

2<sup>nd</sup>, the gifts are given to each Christian, everyone has at least one gift and for that reason, the church is only fully vigorous and healthy when all are ministering. Probably the greatest failure of the church throughout its long history has been the failure (or refusal) to recognize and adhere to this truth. This particular failure has led to the sad reality that some refer to as the clerical domination of the laity. There's developed within the church (for various reasons) a division between "clergy" and "laity" in which the clergy are supposed to lead and do the work of ministry while the people (laity) are to follow docilely along and, of course, give money to support the clergy and their work. A direct quote from the 1906 Papal Encyclical states: "As for the masses, they have no other right than of letting themselves be led, and of following their pastors as a docile flock."

This is not what the church is to be, and where this view prevails, the church and its ministry will suffer. They suffer by the loss of the exercise of those gifts given to the various members of the body. Gifts are for use in serving others. The members serve the church and the world. The clergy serve the laity, particularly in helping them to develop and use their gifts. The clergy are not a separate class from the laity; they are 'ministers of the people' precisely because they themselves belong to the people they are called to serve.

**11** – Paul goes on to reveal the nature or character of the gifts Christ gives.

To begin with, there are more gifts than those listed. Christ's gifts to His church (gifts of the Spirit) are listed in 4 separate chapters of the NT and in one of those chapters in two places. So there are five lists in all and the gifts cited in these lists vary. Here, Paul lists just 4 gifts apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers.

1. Apostles and Prophets. Some have tried to show how apostles and prophets are present today. They point out that the word apostle doesn't only mean the original band of authoritative spokesmen commissioned by Christ; it can also refer to anyone who is sent forth as a witness, mainly to establish churches. Similarly, prophet doesn't always just mean one who receives a special inspired word from God; it can also refer to anyone who speaks boldly in His name (1 Cor 14).

These points are well taken. But they don't really apply to the use of the words in Ephesians. Here apostle and prophet must be taken in their most technical sense. Thus, apostles must refer to those witnesses who were specifically commissioned by Christ to establish the church upon a proper base, and prophets must refer to those who received God's message (as OT prophets had) and recorded it in the pages of what we call the NT. Prophet may also refer to those specially inspired individuals such as Agabus (Acts 21) who functioned while the NT was being written. Neither one of these gifts exists today. We no longer have apostles or prophets in this sense. But we are in no way deprived of the benefits of these first and highly significant gifts to the Body of Christ; the apostles did teach authoritatively, and those who spoke from God have left us His Words and the apostle's teachings embodied in the text of the NT. Christians today do not get their spiritual knowledge immediately from the Holy Spirit, but they do get it mediated through the Spirit teaching them the Word.

2. Evangelists. Unlike the first two gifts, the gift of evangelism hasn't ceased, and sad is the church or period of church history that has but few who are so gifted. An evangelist is one who possesses a special ability to communicate the gospel of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean that others who are not evangelists are excused from the obligation of telling others about Jesus. We all share in that task. The Great Commission declares it. But it does mean that some are especially gifted in this area.



Again, the gift of evangelism is not limited to those who are “professionals,” like Billy Graham, Luis Palau, Greg Laurie or others. On the contrary, it’s more often the gift of laymen and laywomen. In his study of spiritual gifts Billy Graham points out that the only person in the entire Bible who is actually called an evangelist is Philip, and he was a deacon. In the history of the church, there have been quite a few people, both men and women, who have had this gift, and very few of them were ordained. They were simply people who enjoyed and were particularly effective in speaking about Christ to others.

3. Pastors and Teachers. These gifts are often put into one category because they may, in fact, actually be one gift. In v11 the Greek phrasing permits us to join together the words pastors and teachers, so that we could speak of the gift of pastor-teacher. Pastor refers to one who has pastoral oversight of others. It’s based on the idea of a shepherd and looks to Jesus as the perfect example. As in the case of evangelists, many who have this gift are not ordained. For example, pastoring should be the gift of an elder, and possibly also a deacon if he has duties involving spiritual oversight. It’s also a valued gift in Sunday school teachers.

Teacher is self-explanatory. What can be said is that it’s always a most important gift and may be the one gift that’s most needed at the present time. We see the importance of the gift of teaching when we recognize that this is the key thought in Matthew’s version of the Great Commission ([Mt 28:19-20](#)). Clearly, those brought to faith in Christ are to be discipled primarily through teaching.

Although there are significant differences between the gifts listed in [v11](#), which is why they’re given different names and are listed individually, it’s worth noting that, at least in this list, all of Christ’s gifts to the church involve teaching. The apostles and prophets provided the initial and foundational teaching; preserved for us in the NT. Evangelists proclaim the core of this teaching, centered on the gospel of redemption from sin by Jesus Christ. Pastors and teachers instruct and care for the flock through an even fuller communication of scriptural truth. This doesn’t mean there aren’t other gifts that don’t involve teaching. But it does mean that the teaching gifts are particularly needed if the church is to mature in the direction Paul is describing. Nothing is more necessary for the building up of God’s church in every age than an ample supply of God-gifted teachers. It’s teaching that

builds up the church so its teachers who are needed most.

**12-13** – The word equipping also carries the idea of “to put right.” This ancient Greek word was used to describe setting broken bones or mending nets. These gifts of leadership work together to produce strong, mended and fit Christians within the Body of Christ. Which are necessary since it’s actually the people of God who are to do the work of the ministry. Church leaders have the first responsibility to equip God’s people to serve and to direct their service as God leads. The primary purpose of the Church is not to convert sinners to Christianity but to perfect (complete and mature) the saints for the ministry and edification of the Body.

While **v12** reveals the purpose of these gifts, **v13** reveals the desired goals of these gifts. The first goal is that we might all come to the unity of the faith. Again, by clearly stating that this is a unity of faith, Paul’s not commanding any sort of structural or organizational unity, but rather a spiritual unity that is established upon a common faith. The next desired goal is, when the gifts of leadership operate correctly and the saints are properly equipped, then spiritual maturity increases and there is greater intimacy in the experience of God in the believer’s life. Proper function of these gifts brings saints to maturity according to the measure of Christ Himself. This means that as the years go by, we shouldn’t just grow old in Jesus, but more mature in Him as well, both as individual Christians and as a corporate body.

As diverse as these gifts are, what’s to keep everyone from going off in a different direction to do their own thing? The answer is found in the purpose for which the gifts are given. As we have seen, the purpose of Christ’s gifts is to serve Christ’s people, so that the body itself might become increasingly unified in faith and mature in practice.

This can’t be stated too forcefully. If a Christian is using a gift to bring attention to himself rather than to Christ, he’s misappropriating it and will answer to his Master in the judgment. If a Christian is more interested in having others serve him than in his serving others, he’s dishonoring his Master, who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (**Mk 10:45**). If a Christian is using his gift to build his own kingdom rather than Christ’s and thus divides the church instead of uniting it, he is betraying Christ, who is committed to the unification and maturation of his body.

Let us be done with our little kingdoms as well as with the spirit of complacency that doesn't care if the church is divided or immature. On the contrary, let us seek out our gifts and ask how we may use them to the building up of Christ's body. To be sure, Christ doesn't squander His gifts; each one is essential. He doesn't withhold His gifts; they are poured out in full measure. He isn't indifferent as to how His gifts are used; He has His own wise and lofty purposes in view. He also doesn't give His gifts at cross-purposes; all are to serve and edify the church. More importantly, He doesn't abandon those to whom He gives gifts; instead, He continues to work through them and in them for the church's well-being. Where the gifts are received in this spirit and are so used, there the unity of the Spirit is maintained, and the body of Christ is built up "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature." ☺