

# Equipped for Service

Ephesians 4:7-16

August 21, 2016

Let's begin this message by remembering back to our earliest years of Christian Service. Can you remember one of the first times you were called up for service to volunteer at church or went on a short-term mission's trip? Like me, you probably had no clue what you were doing. You just knew this was a good thing; it was something you wanted to do. And you were probably excited as well as a little bit nervous. Ok, let's be more honest with each other: we were a LOT nervous!



I remember going to MX with my youth group. We did so many things wrong! We didn't learn about the culture first. We didn't really train as a team. Many of us drank the water! I remember reading from the booklet that we used to distribute Bibles: "Hola, my llamo Geronimo! Somos Christianos de Los Estados Unidos. Estamos aqui para regular una Biblia a cada familia que no lo tenga. Tienes una Biblia en su casa? Es un regalo; es gratis!" We barely gave these dear Mexican people a chance to respond, because we couldn't speak the language; we could only read it. And, our translators weren't trained on how to manage this group of young, enthusiastic American teens who were on a mission to distribute thousands of Bibles in just a few days' time!

But here are the 2 things that I remember most:

1. God used us powerfully for His purposes. Copies of Spanish New Testaments got delivered all over those little villages. And many of the people who received those Bibles, began reading them right away. They were so grateful for the gift of God's Word.
2. We grew in our personal faith immensely, by leaps and bounds. We left the comfort and conveniences of home, and we sacrificed our time and energy for the purposes of God's Kingdom. It stretched us. It challenged us. And, it launched us into greater Christian maturity.

In Ephesians 4:7-16, Paul rejoices with the Ephesians believers and with the rest of us Christ-followers. He brings us the great news, that by God's grace, WE are equipped for service! Ephesians 4:7 tells us, "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." As Christ followers, we most often think of "grace" as God's unmerited favor. We come with an understanding that we are saved by grace. But in v. 7, this "grace" is talking about something more specific. "Grace" can also mean, "a special endowment that brings responsibility for service."<sup>1</sup> We saw this very thing back in Ephesians 3:7-8 where Paul wrote, "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me...to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ." So, this grace is not a reference to the singular shared gift of our salvation, but rather to the particular gifts that each one of us have been given.

Note that this grace has been given, "...to each one of us...."<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:7. Therefore, there is no such thing as a Christ follower without some gift to use in Christian Service. One of blessings of being a Christ-follower is the particular spiritual gift that Christ gave YOU. Ephesians 4:7 also makes it clear that, "...grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is Jesus who decides who receives which gift. We each receive a particular portion; a particular gifting. We see Jesus working in unison with the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:11, "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines." Like Paul, we

<sup>1</sup> NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, 2011, p. 1988, footnote on Ephesians 3:8.

<sup>2</sup> "Each" is a singular pronoun. Interestingly, following his strong discussion on unity, Paul now points to the individual.

<sup>3</sup> Portion of the bounty μέτρον τῆς δωρεᾶς

all have an amazing opportunity to use our gifting as a part of the body of Christ. God distributes them; now we get to use them, for His glory and for the purposes of building up the church. This is an incredibly cool part of being a Christ-follower!

But how do we know which spiritual gift we've been given? And, how do we know which area of ministry God wants us to serve in? Well, I'm glad you asked! Let's begin by defining a few words. It can be confusing what we mean by a "spiritual gift" as opposed to a natural ability or an acquired skill.

A Spiritual Gift is a Spirit-given empowerment for ministry. This is something only Christians have. It's NOT a Natural Ability; some in-born capacity or talent that comes biologically or genetically. A Spiritual Gift is also NOT an Acquired Skill; an expertise that is developed over time. We can learn to drive a car through practice and learning, but this is not what we are talking about when we refer to a Spiritual Gift. These three are often linked very closely together and work in synergy with each other. But, they are 3 distinct assets. Today, our focus is on Spiritual Gifts.

If you're interested in discovering what your spiritual gift may be, I recommend four things. First of all, pray for God to show you. In Ephesians 1:17 Paul prays, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." God wants us to know Him better. He wants us to understand who He has made us to be and to thrive in our spiritual gifting! So pray, that He'll reveal your gift and where you should use it.

Secondly, consider taking a spiritual gifts discovery. You can visit a website like [www.spiritualgiftstest.com](http://www.spiritualgiftstest.com) or we have paper copies available in the church office. Please remember that these tests are not foolproof nor are they definitive, but many people have found them a helpful starting point. It's just one tool though. Don't rely on this alone. Also, keep in mind, the Bible does not necessarily give us one exhaustive list of spiritual gifts. We find various lists scattered throughout the NT, particularly in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Peter<sup>4</sup> These total up to around 20 or so different gifts but even then we shouldn't assume we have an exhaustive list.<sup>5</sup>

The third thing that you could do is ask people around you what they think. Talk to your friends, parents, coaches, church leaders, teachers, etc. The fact is, if it wasn't for my college advisor at NWC, I'm not sure I'd be a pastor today. In fact, I'm not sure I would have even ended up at college if not for men like Chuck Kazda and Richard Johnson and a woman named Bev. They disciplined and equipped me through my early years as a Christian.

Another thing that you could do to discover your spiritual gift is to ask yourself, "what do I like to do; what am I good at? What burden has God laid on my heart?" I've found that many Christians are often surprised that they are already using their spiritual gifts but they didn't realize there was something more going on than just a natural ability or an acquired skill. It does make a difference when realize that there is something supernatural going on here.

But, also keep in mind, sometimes we are gifted for and called to things that we don't want to do and that we don't like to do. God often stretches us beyond what's fun for us and pushes us out of our comfort zones. Consider Moses in Exodus 3:7-11, "The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering... So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses was called to something that felt outside of his skill set.

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<sup>4</sup> See Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:9-11

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, Peter T., *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans 1999, p. 298.

But God equipped him and used him. Whatever gift you have been given is something to be celebrated and something to be used for God's glory!

Ephesians 4:8-10 clarifies that this is indeed something to celebrate! Ephesians 4:8 borrows from Psalm 68:18: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." Psalm 68 is a hymn celebrating the majestic rule of God as a powerful king who reigns over all of his enemies. The imagery goes from Mount Sinai in the days of Moses to Mount Zion in the days of King David. The Psalm looks forward expectantly to the ongoing redemptive Kingdom of God.

Paul views this as a foreshadowing of Jesus' incarnation, when he came to the lower, earthly regions (4:9) and then His ascension to His throne in heaven (4:10).<sup>6</sup> This picture of Jesus' victorious ascension to His throne in heaven includes the giving out of gifts to all His people. We share in the bounty of Christ's kingdom and we share in the ministry to which he calls His people. How great is that?! Each one of us, personally and individually, have been given a gift. There is a specific ministry where God intends for YOU to serve. You are equipped for service because Jesus picked out a particular gift just for you.

We are also equipped for service because God's equippers have been given to the church. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."<sup>7</sup>

Paul highlights these 5 particular gifts because they are designed to equip others in the church for service. Christ gives us PEOPLE with these gifts, not just the gifts themselves. Note how Paul doesn't say the "gift of apostleship" but rather "the apostles." And so, today at EFC Bemidji, we have been given the gift of the Apostle Paul through his letter to the Ephesians. A letter that is also for us. A letter that equips us for works of service.

And we trust, that when God shows us who our next Youth Pastor is, he will have spiritual gifts as a pastor. He will be God's gift to our church; one who will lead but also equip our youth and young adults for service. In the same way, when one of us agrees to help serve as a teacher or to lead one of our Sunday morning small groups, that person will have spiritual gifting. That person is also one of God's gifts to our church. These people are not sent to do all of the work, but rather to help equip God's people for the work. Every one of us has a spiritual gift. Whatever that gift may be, the key is that we each use it, to build up the body of Christ.

### **What happens when Christ-followers use their spiritual gifts?**

First of all, we share in our Master's happiness! In Matthew 25:24-30, Jesus tells the Parable of Talents. One servant buries his talent in the ground; the Bible calls him wicked and lazy. But, the other servants give it their best shot and the Bible tells us they are invited to share in their master's happiness. Wow! What an invitation!

This past week, we had some people in our church serve at Vacation Bible School. We had an average of 50 Kids/night. We had over 40 people who served; 25 adults/15 teens! Each one of these Christ-followers used their spiritual gifts to serve. They were equipped for service. And, they got to share in God's happiness!

The second thing that happens when Christ-followers use their spiritual gifts is that we have the opportunity to bless other people with God's grace! Those blessings come only when we embrace the fact that we are the conduits of God's grace. Don't hold back the blessing that your gift is to others. We NEED every person serving in the body of Christ! I Peter 4:10 teaches us, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to

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<sup>6</sup> See *NIV Study Bible* notes on pp. 929-930 and 1989-1990.

<sup>7</sup> The "himself" in v. 11 is emphatic, intensifying the point that Christ is the giver. This is His work, among His unified body – the church, of which He is the head.

serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." Only YOU can steward the gift God has given YOU. No one else can spend it. So, when you decide to share it, other people are blessed!

The third thing that happens is that our church matures and grows! It won't atrophy because all of the parts of the body are at work. Rather than limping along; the body of Christ thrives! Picture your favorite Olympic athlete. Can you envision their muscles and ligaments all working together to swim or flip or run or jump? Imagine the mental concentration and the heart pumping oxygen to all the parts that need it. It makes me think of Ephesians 4:16 which says, "...the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

This is how the body of Christ is designed. He gave "different gifts to each of us is for the purpose of enriching the whole."<sup>8</sup> The beautiful celebration of what God is doing in the church comes to its zenith when the whole body "grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

This is why, every fall, our church has our "Ministry Opportunities" form. It's the purple insert in your bulletin. There are baskets in the Fellowship Hall where you can turn them in. I've been a pastor long enough to know that some of you may be feeling tired and overworked at church. We're NOT asking anyone to do more if you are already fully involved. In fact, just opposite of this mornings' challenge, you may need to slow down and pace yourself a little better. It's better to do a few things with excellence than to burn out. Thank you for your faithful and relentless service to the Lord!

We all have seasons in life when we have more or less time available to serve in the church. Some of us may need to increase our involvement. You sense God nudging you. Your spiritual gift is burning a hole in your heart. You know you need to take action soon. It's hard to sit still even now because you don't want to miss out on what God is ready to do with you and through you! Wherever you are at this morning, our church body can't afford to have any of its parts doing nothing.

But this is a personal matter. It's not my job as a pastor to tell you where you should serve or how much time you should give. That's a matter of prayer between you and the Lord. But, it is my job as a pastor to lead you and to tell you what God's Word says. It says that He has put people in our church to train and equip you for ministry. And, it says that each and every one of us has a spiritual gift and it's our great joy and privilege to use it in serving our Lord.

How amazing that God's intentional design is to work through each and every one of us for His purposes and His glory! Live your life worthy of the calling you have received; live out the gifting that you have been given!

1 Corinthians 15:58 encourages us: "My dear brothers and sisters, Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that **your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**"

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on August 21, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

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<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, Peter T., *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 286.