

## **Union With Christ**

### *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*

## **The Challenge of Diversity: Using Our Gifts**

### *Ephesians 4:7 – 13*

#### **Introduction: The Guitar Movement**

Back when I was a junior in college, I was the worship leader for my Christian fellowship. And because I wanted other people to be part of the worship team, especially when I graduated, I decided to teach a beginning guitar class.

We started with the E chord, which slides up and down the guitar's neck to make other chords. So right away, people were able to play very basic songs. But I also said that this class wasn't free. I wasn't asking for anything for myself. But I did ask them to pay it forward at some point. Could you teach someone else guitar? One of my friends, Cecil, improved on my lessons. He added the guitar tablature, the written format for reading guitar chords, and showed people how to read way more chords. So when he taught beginning guitar two or three years later, it was way better than what I had done. Well in 1999, I got married to Ming and moved out to Boston. Early on in my time in Boston, I randomly met a young man from Rochester, NY. And when I introduced myself, he said, 'Hey, wait, you're Mako? Mako Nagasawa?' I said, 'Yeah, have we met before?' He said, 'No, but there's this guy named Jack, and in Rochester, NY we went to the same church. He was a counselor for the youth group, and he taught us guitar. So I learned from Jack, and Jack learned from Cecil, and Cecil learned from you. So I'm your great-grandson in this guitar movement!'

#### **Relevance**

I share that story because I think illustrates well what the Jesus' movement is like. Jesus invested in a few. They invested in others. And so on. Jesus investment wasn't just knowledge of the Bible. It was skills by which we serve the community and show forth the reign of Jesus. It is what the New Testament calls 'spiritual gifts.' There are a few reasons for why we are starting this series called Bodybuilding. First, it's biblical. If you read Romans and especially Ephesians, after the apostle Paul gets done talking about Jesus in Romans 1 - 11 and Ephesians 1 - 3, he talks about how to live as the people of Jesus. And the first subjects he talks about are humility, and spiritual gifts. That's in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. I think it's because as soon as you talk about Jesus resurrected and raised from the dead, you have to ask, 'What is that Jesus doing now? Is he just sitting back on his throne with his feet up?' No. He is giving gifts, and he is coaching us by his Spirit.

Second, it's practical. The impression that I know churches can give off - including us - is that the church showcases a few public speakers and a few musicians. So if you don't have skills like that, then how do you contribute? How do you participate in the work of Jesus' kingdom? Well, there are a lot of practical ways to live that out. So anchored in humility, we practice and develop spiritual gifts in ourselves and one another.

Third, it's personal. It's personal in the sense that you will sense Jesus coaching you. This is not about whether you're unique or special. You are unique and special. But spiritual gifts is about growing steadily towards all the skills that Jesus has for us. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:1, 'Seek all the gifts.' That is both individual and corporate. So it's a process of personal discovery and community discovery. Jesus wants to give you gifts personally, and he wants to give gifts to this community so we can further walk with him in his mission.

#### **Text:**

There are four main passages in the New Testament that discuss spiritual gifts. We're only going to look at one of them: Ephesians 4:7 – 13. And when you approach the topic of spiritual gifts, there's a good reason to start with this letter. Ephesians is not addressed to any specific problem. So this is what you'd get if you could sit this amazing Christian leader named Paul down, and just let him talk. Paul was a Jewish Christian leader who helped spread the message of Jesus around the Mediterranean world. At the time he wrote this, he was under house arrest for preaching Jesus, because the Roman Empire didn't like it. They spoke of Jesus as a new king, a new emperor. So while the Roman Emperor was sitting on his throne, that made him a little insecure. There's another king, named Jesus? Let's throw this guy and other Christians in prison. So Paul was sitting there in this house in Rome, thinking about how to best encourage the Christians around. So he wrote this letter which seems to be a chain letter, and a

general letter. The word 'Ephesus' doesn't appear in the earliest manuscripts, because Paul probably meant for people to copy this letter and take it to the next city. Then they'd read, 'to the saints in [where are we? Boston?]

### **Every Person: v.7**

First, according to v.7, everyone has a gift, and everyone is a gift. 'But to each one of us.' Everyone has a gift. Everyone is a gift. There are no spectators. The movement of Jesus is not a concert where a few people are up here performing. These times have a place and a purpose. It is good to be together. But this is a few hours out of our life. The rest of the time, Jesus wants to express himself in special ways through each one of us. So everyone is involved. Everyone is important. Because Jesus gives gifts to everyone, as the rest of the verse says: 'grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.'

The word 'grace' here is the Greek word *charis*. It means 'strength.' The English word *charisma* comes from this word. And what does *charisma* mean? It means a strength-based authority. So let's not use the word 'grace' as if it only means 'mercy.' God is merciful, God is merciful, God is merciful. Yes, that's true. But God does more than have mercy. He gives us strengths, gifts. So God is gracious in ways that go far beyond our problem of sin. And that's what makes the topic of spiritual gifts so fun. This isn't in relation to sin. It's just in relation to GOD, who loves to give us gifts, and loves to give us strengths. Our sin will certainly affect how much time we can devote to learning and growing in these ways. But fundamentally, Jesus goes above and beyond with the spiritual gifts he gives.

### **Jesus' Victory Parade: v.8 – 10**

Why do we receive these gifts from Jesus? Because, as Paul says in v.8 – 10, these gifts are part of Jesus' victory parade. In v.8 – 10, Paul says, 'Therefore it says, 'When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives,' and he gave gifts to men.'

The quote is from a parade song, which we call Psalm 68. Psalm 68 is a celebration of God going into the Temple in a huge procession. King David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, and the ark was a golden box that served as God's throne. In that parade, God received gifts from people. So you'll notice that Paul actually changes the quotation in the second half of the sentence. Paul says, 'he gave gifts to men.' But Psalm 68 says, 'he received gifts from men.' It's kind of like if the government gave you extra money instead taking taxes from you. What if there were a President who gave you money, instead of receiving money from you? Well that's what is so great about Jesus. Jesus leads a parade, and instead of you tossing things to him, he tosses things to you. Here's a gift! Here's a gift for you! And you!

Illus: I was in New Orleans on a spring break trip with college students, and it happened to overlap with Mardi Gras. We were not in the French Quarter for that. Mardi Gras outside the French Quarter is actually very family friendly. And I guess you're supposed to run up to the parade floats and they're supposed to throw you some beads. So, we got beads. So what? A few days after we got home, I threw mine away. But the gifts Jesus gives us are meant to be developed and strengthened and used over and over again. There's a big difference.

Jesus isn't just giving us toys. He's giving us to each other as his captives. Back in ancient times, when a victorious general came back to Rome or another city, they led captives in their victory parade. Jesus is leading a victory procession. Jesus is taking people captive, because we used to be captives of the enemy, and he's giving us back to each other as gifts. So you know the disciples, the apostles Paul and Peter and John and those men and women?

Jesus took them captive in love, to give them to us, the rest of the church body. Spiritual gifts are an expression of Jesus as king in our midst. He is capturing us, and giving us back to each other as gifts. In verses 9 – 10, Paul looks forward and backwards along the length of this parade, and sees that it stretches downward and upward.

9 'Now this expression, 'He ascended,' what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? [referring to Jesus going to the dead and offering himself to them, as 1 Peter 3:18 – 20 and 4:6 also say] 10 He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.'

Jesus wants to fill all creation with aspects of himself. So every Christian fellowship needs to examine spiritual gifts in some way in order to understanding how generous Jesus is.

Illus: Even when it's challenging. I'm sure the early Christians in Acts were not excited at first to receive Saul of Tarsus, who later renamed himself the apostle Paul, the author of this here letter. Saul was a fire-breathing murderer. He murdered Jesus-followers like Stephen in Acts 7 because he thought they were a heretical Jewish sect. He thought he was doing the will of God by persecuting the followers of Jesus. But Jesus took him captive and gave him back to the church. If Jesus gave us a guy who until yesterday was fire-breathing Nation of Islam street preacher, that's kind of what it would feel like. It doesn't mean that the person or the gift comes in a mature form. Usually not! And they need to be developed and refined, too.

It's kind of how your parents' best characteristics took time to develop in you. Jesus imprints himself onto us uniquely by his Spirit. In the same way, if you know Jesus and are part of God's family, there are gifts that He has invested in you. If you are His child, there are unique things that He has placed in you, so that you reflect particular characteristics of Jesus.

### **For the Body: v.11 – 13**

That's why there is a process of development. Jesus developed his first disciples into apostles, and then in other gifts. Those apostles - they were crazy people at first! But Jesus developed them. So in v.11 – 13, Paul says, 'And he gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers...'

Here, Paul gives a short list of four gifts. This is not exhaustive, since he names other gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. So why does he give just these four? (1) It's possible that this is just the start of a long list of gifts in Paul's mind that he doesn't spell out but is thinking about. (2) It's possible that these are what some call 'leadership gifts' since they have to do with speaking. (3) It's possible that these four terms – apostle, prophet, evangelists, and pastor-teachers – are broad categories that include the other gifts. I am personally uncertain, but I share that with you for you to think about. But the interesting thing is that if #3 is true, then each one of you can find yourself in at least one of these categories: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teacher.

I'm actually not going to go into detail here on these gifts, as we'll do that later on in this series. At a high level, the Apostle with a capital 'A' means the group of people who met Jesus in bodily form here on earth. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:1, 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' And then he says in 1 Corinthians 15:8 that he is the last apostle because Jesus appeared to him last. The Apostles were the original cast of characters by which Jesus established his movement. Jesus empowered them to be authoritative teachers and even miracle workers like he did. Today, sometimes people use the term 'apostle' with a lowercase 'a' to refer to church planters, entrepreneurial people, strategists, and people who develop new kinds of ministries, like the Jesuit order which had some of the greatest missionaries the world has ever seen, or the Christian economic development organization World Vision which has a massive \$2 billion budget. There might be a time where a smaller group of people from this community feel a pull to plant a new church elsewhere. Change like that is difficult. But we will all need to come to terms with that.

Prophets tend to see spiritual dynamics going on in people's hearts, and call people to trust in Jesus more and more. So this is the person with insight and/or foresight. Insight is the ability to see and hear the spiritual things going on. Foresight is the ability to see and hear what might happen or what will happen. The Book of Acts contains stories of people who had either insight or foresight or both, and that book calls them 'prophets': Agabus, Philip, and the four daughters of Philip (Acts 13:1; 21). Sometimes you might feel nervous that there are people God can give information to, without you giving it. A person with a prophetic gift is a truth-teller. For example, there was a time that I was on a prayer team with a man who I believe had a prophetic gift. At a conference, he gently put his hand on the shoulder of a woman he had never met, and said, 'I want you to know that God cares about you, and He cares about what you wrote in your journal, the blue one with flowers on it.' I tried to learn how he heard from God.

Evangelists tend to see who is not yet in the room, and ask the question of how do we engage them with Jesus. Evangelists want to start up conversations about Jesus wherever they go. A few years ago, a friend with this gift lived in my house. He loved to start conversations on the T or people he met, and it was really natural to him to talk about his spiritual life. So of course Jesus would come up in conversation. I wanted to learn from him, and do evangelism together. So together, we designed a big graphical survey called 'God, Peace, and Violence.' We set this thing up in Codman Square, right next to the Farmer's Market on a Thursday afternoon. And we got people's

opinion about what's the connection between God, peace, and violence in our community. We did this for a few hours. He said, 'Man, I love doing this.' I said, 'I love hanging out with you as we do this together.'

Pastor-teachers tend to see who is in the room, and who do we have to work with, and what are our strengths and weaknesses. Pastor-teachers are like coaches. They think about developing people, explaining Jesus and his teaching from Scripture in such a way that people can take it in. That might be one to one. It might be one to many, like what we try to do in Kids Church, or what we try to do here in adult ministry. There's a long history of why Protestant churches have had a 'single pastor model' or pay people and call them 'pastors.' But pastor is a gifting before it's a job. It's what those of you who are parents do with your kids. It's what those of you who co-lead Lighthouse groups do with the members. You're trying to develop people as Jesus would.

Again, there are other gifts listed in other places in the New Testament. They might be subcategories of these basic four, or they might be in addition to these four. In my opinion it could go either way. Whatever else this means, it means that the Christian community is dynamic. It is always growing, always changing, always a little off balance because we are never done.

What does Jesus want as he gives these gifts? It is: 'for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.'

In other words, we grow individually to be more and more like Jesus. We grow corporately, and numerically, to the building up of the body of Christ, Paul says. It's not really so we can develop specialties. It's so we can learn from each other. So gifts are not a way for you to feel special. 'FINALLY!! YES!! I'M GOD'S SPECIAL CHILD!!! AND NOW EVERYONE WILL SEE IT!!' Sorry, that's not what gifts are for. If that were true, then you wouldn't want other people to develop the gift you have. But we're supposed to hope people develop the gifts we have. Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 14:1, 'Pursue all the gifts.' No one is going to have all the gifts, which is why we'll still need each other. But since Jesus has all the gifts, we are to pursue Jesus. That also means that even if you feel like you're bad at evangelism, for example, Jesus is still calling for you to learn and grow in it. Sure, you may never find as much joy in it as someone who has the gift of evangelism. But Jesus still calls us to do it, and learn from those who have the gift.

Illus: I'll give my perspective on how I've tried to learn from the people around me, and their giftedness. My wife Ming and I have lived in Christian intentional community, since before we were married. Back in 2000, we moved into 91 Nightingale Street with our friend Tischa Brown and many others. I would say that I have a management background that helped make our house work. But Tischa had a certain kind of leadership gift. Tischa ran a full blown summer program right inside our house for three summers in a row. We had up to 17 kids involved. Some of our housemates got involved. I learned a lot from Tischa about how to draw good boundaries, and how to be firm but kind with kids, which has helped me in other ways. It's helped Ming and me be foster parents, because we've learned things from Tischa about structuring care and learning. But Tischa's gifts didn't just help us. It helped another housemate named Leslie Moore, who also lived in our house for ten years. After that time, Leslie bought a house of her own further up Nightingale Street and created the first Traction House: a residence-based mentoring and discipleship place where young men could get traction towards their life goals, like getting their GED or becoming stable or whatever. Then another friend Laura created the second Traction House on Esmond Street, this one for women including young moms. So this gift for structuring care, learning, and expectations was different, and it's helped all of us.

What does this mean for you? I hope it gets you excited. We are excited to see what God is going to do in you and through you. God has given you gifts, aspects of Jesus that stand out unusually well in you. Some people have some gifts and other people have others. God's gifts in you are not there so you can just keep them to yourself, nor are they for comparing yourself to others. God's gifts in you are there to make you a unique blessing to other people. It is a way that Jesus shows himself uniquely through you. And then it's a way that He combines us, puts us together like pieces of a puzzle, so that the fullness of Jesus is revealed.

Illus: There's a book called Pay It Forward that came out in 1999. It was made into a movie in 2000. It's about an 11 year old boy who gets this assignment in social studies class to make the world a better place. So 11 year old

Trevor invents the 'pay it forward' idea. He does a major favor for three people. Each of those three people cannot pay it back. They have to pay it forward to three more people. So it'd be like paying for the groceries of the person behind you. And the movie is about how this 'pay it forward' movement spreads, even despite the bad motivations of people, which lead to lying, apathy, and betrayals. Even despite all that, people do 'pay it forward.' Jesus invests spiritual gifts in us, pieces of himself, for us to pay it forward. Kind of like how I invested guitar skills in a few people, and asked people to pay it forward.

So my encouragement to you is:

1. If you have not yet come to know Jesus, I would encourage you to get to know him. He wants to invest in you.
2. If you do know Jesus, then I encourage you to take the initiative to explore what God has invested specifically in you. There are gifts in you waiting to be unlocked and unleashed.
3. If you know Jesus, and have thought about your spiritual gifts before, please work on articulating how you discovered them, how you explored them, and how you practice them. It will be a blessing to the rest of us.
4. Do something like join a Lighthouse group, or if you can't make that, have regular times with people. You want to be in a small community of people where who you are really matters. Small groups are a way to experience Jesus in your midst, to get to know each other better, to care for each other in really practical ways, and to serve with other people. Large group here is important because we want to learn Scripture and worship together, but it's easy to be anonymous here, or kind of be not known. We want you to be known. I don't think that practicing your spiritual gifts on Facebook is really enough. If you like posting encouraging bible verses, great. Please keep doing that. But that's not the same thing as developing the gift of encouragement or teaching. You need the face to face feedback. Don't rob yourself of the relational aspect of this.

Finally, let me say this: Every investment that I've made in Jesus has been worth it. Whether it's meant that I take a step back and invest in exploring a difficult area of my life, or a difficult section of the Bible, or whether it's meant that I take a risk, or whether I've had to expose myself to criticism, it's been worth it. HE has been worth it. HE wastes nothing. So make the investment in Jesus. He's invested himself in you. Invest yourself in him.