

Ephesians 4:7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

*“When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men...”*

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

Dear Friends in Christ,

YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

A. Not Forgotten, but Equipped

At what point does somebody give up waiting?

When Jesus died, the disciples were bereaved and traumatized. A couple days later they were overjoyed to hear that he rose from the dead. And then they saw him! But then they found out that Jesus after rising from the dead was not quite the same Jesus they had known before he had died. Instead of spending night and day with their teacher, Jesus now only visited them from time to time. Their relationship had changed, and you know how your heart feels when a close relationship changes. After a month and a half of that heartbreak and anxiety, it was deepened when Jesus ascended into heaven. If the death of a loved one is awful, then what of being twice bereft of that same person in two months’ time?

For the disciples, it was simply too much. Too many emotions, too much to process. I think that is why the disciples were looking up into heaven. Death, resurrection, and now this. What does it mean? I have to say, I do not envy those disciples. All the uncertainty, the sense of loss. I wonder at what point the disciples gave up hoping that Jesus would come back.

As you drive around town week after week, perhaps you have seen a few houses flying a black flag. They aren’t flying the black ISIS flag. They are flying another black flag. If you look out the window of the fellowship hall with binoculars, you might be able to see that same black flag today. It is flying over on The Wall, that replica of the Vietnam War Memorial (on display nearby for a few days). You will find that flag right next to the Stars and Stripes at the center angle of the wall. It is an important flag. Take a close look. The flag has the slightly bowed head of a crew-cut man. Behind the man in the picture is a guard tower and a strand of barbed wire. Written on the flag are these words: “You are not forgotten.” It is a flag for American prisoners of war and missing in action service men. “You are not forgotten.” If any of you want to tell me more about this flag, I’d love to learn more after church or this week.

Ever wonder if you were forgotten—not as soldiers, but as Christians? I think the early Christians had that question. “*After he said this, [Jesus] was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee... why do you stand there looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’*” (Acts 1:10) “He’ll be back. You will not be forgotten.” But a couple

decades later he had not returned, and some of those Twelve Apostles were dying off, and the world seemed just as cruel and selfish as ever. Those early Christians had to be wondering, “Have we been forgotten? Have we been left behind?” POW/MIA?

In answer to this worry, our reading tells us, ***“When he ascended on high, [Jesus] led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”*** Jesus’ ascension is compared to a victory parade. As Jesus goes by in victory, he gives gifts to his people. Not salt-water taffy, starlight mints or butterscotch buttons. Jesus hands out far more precious gifts at his victory parade, at his ascension into heaven. In that moment of ascending, he handed over the ministry to his followers. Suddenly, he was out of the picture. Suddenly they were no longer followers, but now messengers sent ahead. No longer were they disciples, but apostles. When he sent them out, Jesus sent serious gifts with them to get the job done. He has continued to do this for the Church.

“To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”

B. Ministers of the Gospel Are a Special Gift

Now you will notice something about this list. This list includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. All of those people have this in common: they work directly with the Word of God. That makes sense. It is God’s Word that creates and builds faith, and the Church is nothing if not a fellowship of faith.

There are lots of beneficial things that happen in our churches. Lots of good charities and loving work. But the one thing that creates and builds faith is God’s Word. If God’s Word is not there, then there is no faith strengthening going on. If there is no Word of God, then our work is what any unbeliever can do. That is why Paul focused on Gospel workers.

For the sake of building his church up, Jesus gives the special gift of people who minister with his word.

C. Ministers of the Gospel Are Not a Special Gift

Having said that someone might think that if they aren’t an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher, then they don’t have a special gift from God. Or on the other side, someone could get offended over this whole thing and say, “Yep, there go those preachers thinking that they are better than everyone else. They declare themselves the receivers of special gifts from God.”

Well, that is what medieval Catholicism was all about. There were lots of monasteries and monks and abbies and nuns. The official line was that the monks and nuns lived lives full-time devoted to God and were better Christians than other people.

Martin Luther saved some of his most feisty arguments for this point. (Remember, Martin Luther had been a monk and was a preacher.) He loved to talk about “vocation”. He loved to point out that every Christian who does his work out of love for God and neighbor does equally well. It doesn’t matter whether you are a milkmaid or a pastor.

Or think of John the Baptist. When John the Baptist preached to crowds this is what happened: *“‘What should we do then?’ the crowd asked... Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, what should we do?’ ‘Don’t collect any more than you are required to,’ he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, ‘And what should we do?’ He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.’”* (Luke 3:10-14).

When done for God and neighbor, every act is equally good in God’s eyes. The godly pastor and the godly accountant or factory worker do just as much for God. They do what God has given them to do.

Maybe we can look at it this way. Walk over to the The Wall. Look at the names. There is

something missing from every one of those soldiers' names. Look at all 58,000 names. You won't find it. You will find no indication of rank. In talking with people, I get the impression that rank is inseparable from military life. And yet when that wall was built to honor tens of thousands of servicemen, rank was left out. It was left out intentionally. It was left out intentionally because every one of those soldiers gave the same thing. No one soldier's life was more sacred than another.

And so in the church, while some might be church presidents or pastors, that "rank" does not make that person more holy before God. ***"To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."*** Our stations are not our choosing, but Christ's giving. It is not the job that matters, but faithfulness to Christ's assignment.

D. The Reason for the Gifts

But what will really help us understand that this is not about the apostles or prophets or pastors or you or me is this: Listen to *why* Jesus gave these roles and duties to people. ***"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,"*** Why? ***"...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith... and become mature."***

The point of the gifts is not the individual, but the entire Christian Church. The point of the gifts is not self-fulfillment, but service. The reason that I am a pastor is not for myself or my family or employment. By God's grace this calling of a pastor does take care of my family, but that is secondary. The reason that God has called me here is not for myself, but for Christ's church. Every calling in life should be viewed in this way. Christ has measured out the gifts and responsibilities to each of us. It's not about me, it's about Jesus and his Church. You have been given what you have in order to help others grow, to become mature in our faith.

In Jesus' name, may God forgive us for all the times we have not used Christ's gifts for him. Oh yes, we do need time off and rest and food to put on the table. But you know what I am talking about. When the difficult choice was before us, and we chose the self-serving way, the easy way, the lazy way. Or maybe we went and did what we needed to do—but only with bitter and complaining hearts. Gracious Jesus, forgive me for all those times I have not used your gifts as I should.

May God preserve all of us at those moments when we are tempted to abuse his gifts. May he strengthen our resolve to deny personal gain of all sorts, to do the hard work for the sake of the body of Christ.

Believe it or not, every adult has those positions of trust in the spiritual world. You might not be a pastor or teacher, but we all have people around us for whom we care spiritually. We have direct care for our family members. Others might simply be friends and acquaintances. Jesus has given us gifts, to build up God's people. His Church has not been forgotten.

Though we do not see Jesus, we are not forgotten. He is the Lord of the Church who takes care of his Church. Under his gracious leadership, ***"To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."*** Amen.