

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.⁸ Therefore it says,

*"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men."*

⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Group projects can be horrible. Once before I told you about a group project I did in Seminary. I had to find three students who I could teach some of the same material to as I was learning. Then they had to take a test on what they learned. The problem was a sizeable portion of my final grade was based on the test grades of my so-called students. They were all busy college students who did not work all that hard so my final grade dropped from an A to a B as a result of this group project. I don't like group projects for this reason.

Thankfully, the growth in our Christian life is an individual pursuit and not a group project. Or is it? We may like to think and we often act like the Christian life is an individual pursuit. Of course, in many ways it is. If you are not willing to take responsibility for your love relationship with Christ, then nothing is going to happen. If, for example, your Bible gathers dust all week until you dutifully carry it to church again the next Sunday. If that is your spiritual growth plan, then you're in trouble. But the opposite mistake in this equation would be to assume that it's all

about you. Most Christians are not lone ranger Christians but we fail to realize how our personal spiritual growth truly is a “group project.”

Let me lay out the vision of this section of chapter four. I want to begin with the end in mind. I want us to see what we are aiming at. As the saying goes, if you don’t know what you’re aiming at, you’re sure to hit it. And I believe this is a major reason why we struggle as believers. Either we don’t have a goal or else we have the wrong goal. We shoot our arrows randomly and then walk up and draw a bullseye around where the arrow landed. “Success!” we exclaim but we can’t admit that we cheated. So before we get into the nitty gritty of this passage, let’s look at the end goal—our target.

Verse thirteen is the end goal of every believer’s life: *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*

There’s the goal—maturity and the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. I love that last phrase. Let’s take work it through backwards to make sure we understand it.

The fulness of Christ—this simply means to have and know Christ in his fulness. Here we have another instance of taking a bite out of infinity. Jesus’ fulness is infinite so we will never know and have his fulness in that sense. But we can be full of Jesus. The more we have the more is yet to be had. What a glorious thought.

The stature of the fulness of Christ. In physical terms, stature is our height. How tall we are—how much we have grown. So the stature of the fulness of Christ would be growing into the fulness of Christ.

The measure of the stature would be how we measure up. Here’s the stature of the fulness of Christ and here’s us. How do we measure up? How far do we have to go? And when I talk about measuring up, it’s not meant to be a comparison. It’s not a competition. We are not measuring ourselves against one another. Now there is a certain degree where that can be helpful. Paul says “Follow me as I follow Christ.” We can be inspired by other believers and encouraged by their spiritual growth, but not for the purpose of comparison.

In regard to spiritual growth, I have always said, “It doesn’t matter where you are at. It only matters where you are going.” It’s OK if you are just starting out. Everyone starts somewhere. It doesn’t even matter if you have been stuck for a while. Don’t beat yourself up. Don’t compare yourself to others. Just set a vision for the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. This is Christian maturity. There’s no end to it but there is always a beginning. We haven’t yet looked at how we get there or why I am calling the journey a “group project,” but first we needed to see the goal, our target.

That’s the goal but guess what happens when we do not reach this goal. We have a Hebrews 5 problem. This was the very first passage I ever wrote a paper on in seminary and it has stuck with me ever since.

¹¹ About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:11-14).

Milk is for the immature but the vision before us is for “mature manhood” which is spiritual maturity for all who seek it.

Next, let me show you what has been called the “all by itself” principle. Did you know you could automate your Christian growth? It’s not exactly an auto pilot, but in some ways it can be automatic or all by itself. Look at verse 16. ¹⁶ *from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

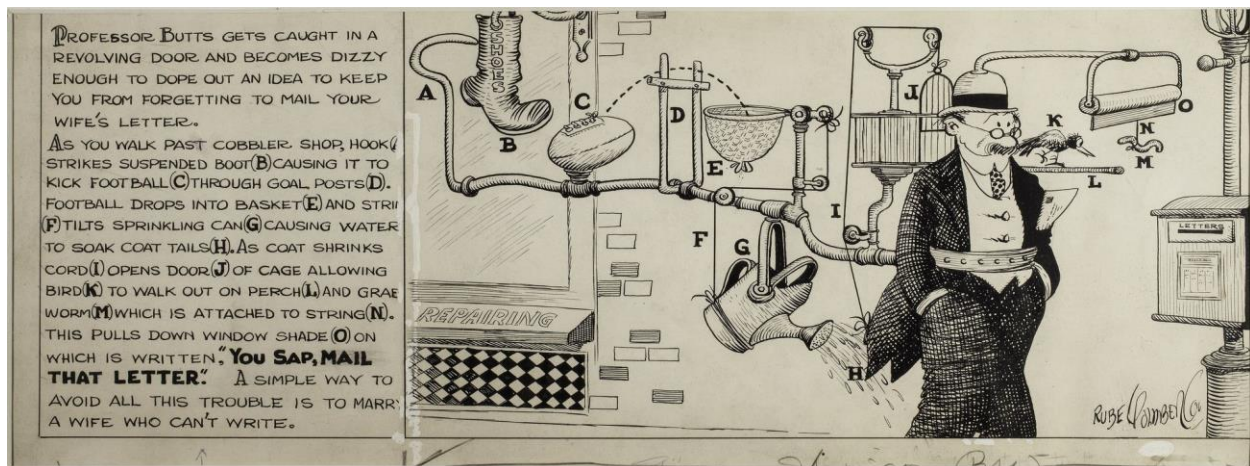
I’ve been working on memorizing Ephesians for well over a year. I do good, then get away from it, but I have reviewed chapter four as much or more than the others. And when I go over it—which is meditation, by the way—that’s one of the beautiful things about Scripture memory. Review is meditation. It rolls over and over in your mind. You see things you never saw before. You see links to other parts of Ephesians you may not have seen otherwise. You see links to other parts of Scripture. I may have told you that I do 90% of my Scripture memory and review when I run. And that’s been my chief problem. When I get away from running regularly, I also get away from Scripture memory.

I realize some of you are thinking, Oh my goodness. Running and Scripture memory, I don’t want to do either of those things! Well you don’t have to run, but I do so strongly encourage some bit of Scripture memory. So I have struggled and put it off and I tell myself, “I don’t have time to run today. I just can’t fit it in.” Then days that I skip start to accumulate. On the other hand, there have been so many times when I run and review Ephesians that I tell Karen, “I don’t have time not to do this.” And what I mean is that the brief 25 or so minutes on the treadmill or running down the road were so productive that I’d be wasting time not to do it. I can’t tell you how many ideas and plans I have made while running and reviewing. I should just call it ‘runviewing.’ I’m running along and the sweat is pouring down my face but I’m elated. God just gave me another insight or ministry application or it leads to prayer or just inspiration and encouragement that I’m just so excited as my feet keep a movin’. And that happens from meditation. It’s as simple as that. I need to keep reminding myself that I don’t have time *not* to do it. I make excuses at times but the benefit has been so amazing.

Why did I tell you all of that? I told you to encourage you in Scripture memory. That’s one reason. But I also told you because verse sixteen was one verse that just haunted me in a good way. This is especially true of the last phrase—*makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*. And you’re thinking, “OK Maurer, what’s so great about this verse anyway?” And here’s the problem I have in communicating this. It means so much to me because I meditated on it so often, because I saw it in the full context of verses 1-16 and in the larger context on all of

Ephesians. So it's really hard to describe all this has meant to me in a minute or two, but I'll at least get things started.

What I see here is that if the other pieces are put in place, this will “make the body grow.” In other words, there is a built in mechanism in place, sort of an automated spiritual growth. Now understand, there's nothing simple about this. I have not discovered the magic bullet of spiritual growth but there is something quite exciting here I want you to see. You know what a Rube Goldberg machine is, right? Rube Goldberg was an engineer turned cartoonist who would create the most elaborate and ridiculous “inventions” like this one. Each part of the invention led to the next part and so on. All of the parts need to work together for the invention to work, otherwise, it's just a mess with no function whatsoever.



When I read this verse—*when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*—it makes me think of a Rube Goldberg machine. Each part must be working properly.

This illustration works at one level but the problem is that the body of Christ is not a silly machine. The body of Christ and the kingdom of God are living entities. They are alive. So the all by itself principle I see here is better illustrated by Mark 4. Mark chapter four is chock full of famous parables. It begins with the parable of the sower. Next up is the lamp under a basket. The fourth parable is the mustard seed. That one certainly illustrates the living nature of God's kingdom, right. A tiny mustard seed can grow so large that birds can nest in its branches. We know those three parables very well. But tucked in between the parable of the lamp under a basket and the mustard seed is a lesser known parable that doesn't get much attention.

And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, (NIV—“all by itself”) first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4:26-29).

The seed grows but the farmer doesn't know how it happens. The ground produces the full-grown ear “by itself.” Now if you ripped this parable out of context, you might conclude that the

kingdom of God is just a giant mystery and we will never understand. It just grows all by itself. Now there is an ‘all by itself’ principle at play here but it’s not a great mystery as to how it happens. Especially when you bring it to bear on this Ephesians passage.

Let me bullet point some of this for clarity.

- The kingdom of God/body of Christ is a living entity.
- When the parts all work together it “makes the body grow.”
- “growth” is the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”

So rather than a Rube Goldberg machine, the body of Christ is more like a garden. This matches the Mark 4 passage of the growing seed in the ground. Gardeners, farmers and everyone realize what is needed for a healthy garden or healthy crop. You need the right amounts of healthy soil, water and sunshine. Of course you also need the damaging insects and diseases to stay away. As we will eventually see, even bugs and diseases have a counterpart in this passage.

So that’s the target. That’s what we’re aiming at. That’s the goal—spiritual maturity that has no end. The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. If that does not appeal to you, then something is wrong. There is no greater purpose, no greater treasure. This is what I want for myself and what I want for all of you. Are you in?

So what are all of the parts that need to work together? How do we jump start this “all by itself” principle? The question is not a what but a who. The parts are you and me. We’ve seen the goal but the turning point in this passage comes at verse seven. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. In this week’s Table Talk I asked the question, “In what way is verse 7 different from verses 1-6?” The last two Sundays we dove into the powerful unity that we have as believers. Our unity with one another is just as real as our unity with Christ. The two are inseparable.

But verse seven adds a whole new layer. *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.* The Christ’s gifts are the spiritual gifts listed in verse 11—apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. So do you see what is going on here? Christ gives gifts to individuals. The whole church does not get the gift of teaching but some within the body do have this gift. So the difference between verses 1-6 and verse 7 is this: verses 1-6 are about we and verse 7 is about me. This is the diversity within the unity of the body. This is we and me working together.

Notice a few important points about these gifts. In Corinthians they are called spiritual gifts but here in Ephesians he just calls them gifts. The first thing to note is that they are forms of grace. “Grace was given to each one.” Now we haven’t even begun to talk about your personal spiritual gifts. We’ll get to that next Sunday. But it doesn’t matter exactly what your gifts are because whatever they are, they are grace to you and to others—when you use them. There’s the rub, right? Spiritual gifts are not your possession. They are given to you to be used on behalf of others. But like all use of our gifts, they circle back and bless us as well.

Yesterday in Walmart I ran into Dan Melcher. He had just finished directing a very large Kids’ Camp at Living Waters. I said, “Dan, you look great. You don’t look tired at all.” He said that he

was tired—of course he was—but you could also see that twinkle in his eye. As Dan served with his gifts, grace was poured back into his life.

The second thing to notice is that the gifts are sovereignly given. They are given “according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” 1 Corinthians 12 reads, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” You don’t get to choose your spiritual gifts but you do choose whether or not you make use of them.

One day a boy was watching his mother doing something at the kitchen table with a bunch of papers. He asked her, “Mom, what are you doing.” She told him that she was paying the bills. “What are bills” he asked. Mom explained that bills are money that is owed to people for doing things that help their family. The bank helped their family by lending money so they could buy their house. The garbage men help their family by picking up the trash each week. All of these people need to get paid for how they helped the family.

This sparked a great idea in the boy’s active mind. The next morning mom found a piece of paper that was slipped under her bedroom door. It was from her son and at the top of the page in large letters it said “BILL.” He listed his chores that he had done to help the family. Washing the dishes—\$5. Cleaning my room—\$10. Cleaning the garage—\$20. The total at the bottom was \$35. The boy’s mom read the bill, took \$35 out of her purse and paid the boy for his work. The boy was pretty excited to hold all of that money in his hand and thought he had discovered a gold mine of an idea. He went to sleep that night dreaming of what he was going to do with all the money he would earn.

The boy woke up the next morning to find a piece of paper that was slipped under his door and guess what it said at the top? BILL. This bill was typed up and all official looking. Like the bill he gave his mom, this one was broken down by categories. Buying clothes your whole life—\$5,000. Providing food since you were born—\$10,000. Providing a home for you—\$20,000. The total at the bottom read \$35,000. Suddenly the boy didn’t think his idea was all that great. But then he noticed a handwritten note next to the total which read “Paid in full because I love you.”

It’s just like this in the body of Christ. Even when we give, it’s not a sacrifice. All we do is reach into the infinite riches of Christ and share it with others. That’s all it is.

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