



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.

Make disciples. Go ahead. What are you waiting for? Just do it. Get busy.

Making disciples is the number one command in the New Testament. In many ways it is the culmination of all other commands. Evangelism is a part of making disciples. Loving one another is a part of making disciples. Worship is a part of making disciples. That’s why we consider our disciplinemaking brochure to be so foundational to the Christian life. It doesn’t have details and how-to’s like most brochures might. It’s not event oriented. It doesn’t tell you what is happening, where and what time. We call it a brochure because it looks like a traditional brochure but it’s really a summary of our overall vision. Making disciples is the very core of what it means to be a church and what it means to live as a maturing believer. Show me any command in the Bible and I will show you how it fits under the banner of making disciples.

So, go ahead. Make disciples. What are you waiting for? 😊

I'm having a little fun with you for a reason. If it's that important, of course we should be doing it all the time. But it's not that simple, is it? You see, making disciples is the end product but there are smaller parts and pieces, if you will, that go into making disciples. It's a bit like saying, "Build a car. Go ahead. What are you waiting for?" Building a car is not just one thing, is it? Assuming you can build an engine then you need build the other stuff. You need those round rubber things and that thing that you pull to let you into the thing and lots of other things. It's a complex piece of machinery with countless parts. You don't just build a car, you build the parts of the car and then you assemble them in the right configuration.

Some of us are no more likely to make disciples than we are to build a car. But there are lot of similarities between the two. There are many parts to it and you need all of the parts to make it work. Last Sunday I talked about the "all by itself principle." Let me back up to verse 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.*

There are many parts to this discipling process—the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped. Each of the parts must be working properly. All of this must happen but we should not get bogged down in the end product. Instead, we should focus on the various parts that go into making disciples. In other words, if you put quality parts into the discipling, the end product will be good. Another way of expressing this would be to say that we should have qualitative goals and not quantitative goals when it comes to discipling. We don't need to be bigger, we need to be better. And we can work on one part at a time.

Getting back to the car analogy. Let's say that you wanted to make a car that gets 200 miles to the gallon. That's the end goal. That's a quantitative goal, isn't it? It's a numbers goal. But in order to achieve that goal, you first must break it down into parts that will make a difference on the final outcome. In this case, you would be working with two basic variables—engine efficiency and reduction of friction. There are more factors at work but these are probably the biggest variables. Reduction of friction is always the holy grail in any kind of motion, whether on the land, sea or air. For a car, your focus would be on better tires, improved aerodynamics, that sort of thing. You would be attempting to improve the quality of the friction. You would also want to improve the quality and efficiency of the engine. This is why Tesla's are suddenly popular. It's sort of the cool electric car. But making a car that gets 200 miles to the gallon requires improving the quality of the various parts. 200 miles per gallon is the ultimate goal but this quantitative goal must be broken down into qualitative goals.

You can see this in our discipleship brochure. The overall goal is to make disciples but we accomplish that goal by Abiding in Christ, Shepherding the body and rescuing the perishing. Each of those parts is further broken down. If you've never been to a LEAD session, this is how we run those. We focus on the parts and pieces of discipleship and as we do



that, the overall goal of making disciples will become more likely. So the command, the necessity, the big audacious goal to make disciples but all of the parts must work together. When each part is working properly, it *makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

That's the big picture. The goal is maturity for all—*the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.* all of the parts working properly. Here are a few questions for you as we dig further.

Do you know your part?

Are you doing your part?

Are you doing your part in the right way and with the right motives?

A vital part of this process is the use of our spiritual gifts. Last Sunday we pointed out two observations from the text.

Spiritual gifts are forms of grace—*but grace was given to each one*

Spiritual gifts are sovereignly given—*according to the measure of Christ's gift*

Next, we want to understand how we received these gifts. Paul is a Bible scholar, or from our perspective, an Old Testament scholar. Paul quoted from the Old Testament about 200 times and 12 of those are in Ephesians. Right in the middle of this section on unity of the body and diversity of gifts, Paul quoted from Psalm 68:18.

⁸ *Therefore it says,*

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

At first glance, this seems pretty obscure, but Paul inserted it here so it needs to be understood. First, let's look at his explanation in verse 9.

⁹ *In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?*

Descended means Jesus' incarnation. Christ humbled himself by becoming a man. He descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth. I often prefer the NASB over the ESV but in this case, it

is confusing, if not outright wrong. The NASB reads, “descended into the lower parts of the earth.” Many have used this text and one from 1 Peter 3 to say that Jesus descended into hell. This was so common a belief that it made its way into the Apostles Creed. If you grew up in a mainline church like I did, you said this each Sunday. “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day arose from the grave. He ascended into Heaven.”

Let’s be clear. Jesus did not descend into Hell. The Bible never says that he did. The Greek text literally says “he descended to/into the lower regions the earth.” It does not say “into the lower regions *of* the earth.” Since there are no commas in the Greek text, the translators added one which has the sense of “descended into the lower regions, (namely), the earth.” I firmly believe that this was Jesus’ incarnation. He had always been with the Father but when he became a man, he came down to the earth. It was an infinitely humbling experience. Jesus gave up his rights before he gave up his life.

This understanding of descended makes sense when you lay it alongside of his ascension. ¹⁰ *He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.*) Ascension clearly means his return to the Father. But he did not just return. He ascended “far above all the heavens that he might fill all things.” This is a statement of the supremacy of Christ. We only need to go back to chapter one to see what Paul meant.

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:19-23).

This is a statement of the absolute supremacy of Christ over all things. This was granted to him when the Father raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavens. So what Paul wrote about Christ’s ascension in chapter four was a summary of what he wrote in chapter one.

Two things happened when he ascended. He led a host of captives and he gave gifts to men. I don’t want to spend too long on the host of captives idea. It is either captives over which Christ has won victory, as in they are his enemies or else they are captives who were rescued by Christ, that is, believers. I happen to think that we are the captives, rescued and redeemed by Jesus for his glory.

But at his ascension, the gifts were given—spiritual gifts. Now since gifts are empowered by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit was not poured out until Pentecost, they were given later. Nevertheless, Christ offered them at his ascension.

But it’s not just that we received gifts. It’s not like Jesus went on a business trip and brought us back a present. His ascension, which Paul calls filling the universe, is his rightful place at the right hand of the Father. It demonstrates Jesus absolute supremacy over all people, all powers for

all time. But here's what we also need to catch here. Part of Jesus' filling the universe and carrying out his plan for the nations was to give us spiritual gifts. Do you see? They go together. Jesus supremacy is completely tied in with giving us gifts. You and I—all believers—the church—are his plan for the universe. It's no mere coincidence that his ascension—his exultation is associated with giving us these gifts. They are two sides of the same coin. The use of our gifts and service to him are a necessary part of his plan for the nations. ¹ Now as the Lord over all, we always need to remind ourselves that God has never needed us in the way that we need others and help from outside of ourselves. He doesn't need us but he has chosen to use us for his glory. And anything that is for his glory will always also be for our own good.

1. Spiritual gifts are spiritual, not natural.

I mentioned last week that Paul uses the word “gifts” here in Ephesians but not the word spiritual. In 1 Corinthians 12, which is probably the longest section in the New Testament on spiritual gifts, Paul uses the word “spiritual” but not the word “gift.” When he introduces the topic in verse one of 1 Corinthians 12, our English translations read, “Now about spiritual gifts” but the Greek only has “Now about spiritual.” Paul uses the word gift in later verses so it is clear that he is talking about spiritual gifts but we need to drill into our minds that these are spiritual gifts—gifts from the Holy Spirit. Anything else is a counterfeit of some kind, meaning either it comes from our flesh or from the enemy.

2. You don't possess a gift, rather you manifest it through the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:7 reads, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Your gift operates when the Holy Spirit is manifested through your service. This goes hand in hand with the last point, they are spiritual in nature, not natural. We are mere conduits and channels for the Spirit's work.

3. Spiritual gifts must not be used independently.

1 Corinthians 12:7 reads, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Your spiritual gift is not for you. But, but, every other time I receive a gift, it's my gift!” Usually yes. Let me revisit an illustration I used before. If you are given an electric shaver, the assumption is that you and you alone will use it. But if you are given a 20 foot long dining room table as a gift, the assumption is that you will use it with and for others. You would look pretty silly sitting at the end of a 20 foot table all by yourself. Only kings of old and dictators do such a thing. Such a table would have been given to you for the common good of those around you. Spiritual gifts are 100% dining room table. They are given to you—yes, but to be used for the common good. Christian maturity is a group project.

4. Spiritual gifts are not the same thing as spiritual maturity.

The church in Corinth was heavily into using their spiritual gifts. This was Paul's hope for them. “so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:7). They were very active with their spiritual gifts. Despite this, they were a very immature church. Two chapters later Paul wrote, “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1).

At every ordination council I sit in—generally this is twice per year—I always ask this question of the ordination candidates. “Which is more important—spiritual gifts or fruits of the Spirit?” Most do get it right, thankfully. That's why I always say that character trumps giftedness. Give

me a man or woman with good character but fewer gifts and skills every time. Don't get me wrong. Character can be trained. It must be, right? That is the goal of the Christian life. But if you are not teachable to begin with, you're not going to get very far. Before you concern yourself with your spiritual gifts, ask yourself this question. "Would I be willing to ask a trusted friend or two to tell me about any blind spots that I have?" We can't see our own blind spots which is another reason we need one another. Character always trumps giftedness.

5. We will be held accountable for the discovery and development of our spiritual gifts. You need to read no further than the parable of the talents to understand that we are held liable for all that we have been given. You will be held accountable and so will I and the elders/shepherds of Grace Church. Our job is to equip you

6. You cannot know your spiritual gifts unless you serve, serve, serve.

Since Paul's spiritual gifts inventory was lost, we don't have an authoritative way to quickly know our gifts. 😊 And here's the thing. There are no shortcuts. How many of you have taken a spiritual gifts inventory of some kind? I have taken several over the years and have seen some benefit from them. But there are two key problems with these. The first problem is that some inventories have poor definitions for some of the gifts. The questions they ask in the inventory are meant to draw out the definition. So if the definition is wrong, the questions are going to lead you down the wrong path.



"Dear Timothy, I'm sending under separate cover extra copies of the spiritual gifts inventory quiz for your church."

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The other problem is worse, in my opinion. If you are not already serving the Lord in a variety of ways, spiritual gift inventories are little more than a personality test. They might help you see what your personality is like or the kinds of things you are interested in—which by itself is not a bad thing. But a quality inventory is going to ask you about how you have used your talents but if you haven't used them, it's not going to give you answers. Now it will give you answers. That's the nature of those things but they won't be very helpful answers.

Do you know why I am a pastor? Because I went to Seminary? Because I'm super spiritual? Please. I am serving in vocational ministry because I served and then I served and then I served some more. I cut my ministry teeth during four summers as a camp counselor and working with the youth at my church. Ultimately, I never felt called to be a youth pastor but God used all of those hours and years of service to help define who I was and who he wanted me to be.

Rich Maurer
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¹ "The building of the body is inextricably linked with his intention of filling the universe with his rule, since the church is his instrument in carrying out his purposes for the cosmos." (O'Brien, P. T. (1999). [*The letter to the Ephesians*](#) (p. 297). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.)