

## GIFTED MINISTERS FOR MATURE GROWTH

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### Ephesians 4:7-16

#### Opening Prayer: Psalm 68:1-3; 18; 32-35

This opening prayer is from Psalm 68, and it depicts the Lord's victory over His enemies. In ancient times, victorious kings would have a homecoming parade, a procession, with defeated enemies trailing behind at the end of the procession in chains to be mocked and scorned. Throughout the king's military campaign, he would load up the spoils, the booty, of the regions and peoples he conquered. Then, in this homecoming victory procession, the king would share these spoils with his faithful citizens as gifts that would further build up his kingdom. This is the imagery of Psalm 68, and Paul amazingly uses this very Psalm to depict Christ's victory on our behalf.

Paul spends the first three chapters of Ephesians articulating that Christ and His victorious conquest has brought about our unity and reconciliation with God and one another. In chapters four through six, Paul articulates how we are to live in light of this victory as a people united in Christ's love. Like a small sample of the entire letter to the Ephesians, in **4:7-10**, Paul uses Psalm 68 to articulate Christ's victory. As a result of Christ's conquest over evil, Paul discusses the gifts Jesus gives to us, His People, in **verse 11**. This verse will be our focus this morning. Then in **verses 12-16**, Paul stresses that Jesus graciously gives us these gifts to equip us, as His People, for works of service that will build up His Body, the Church. Our works are intended to contribute to our mutual maturation as servants of King Jesus within His Kingdom. Importantly, the gifts Jesus gives in **verse 11** to equip His People for these works of service are other people gifted to be engaged in the ministry of the Word. Their ministry equips others, so that we all may

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mature and grow in the security of our faith as we each do our own part in love for one another.

**READ *Ephesians 4:7-10* (READ *Psalm 68:15-18*)** Bashan, located east of the Sea of Galilee, is now called the Golan Heights in modern-day Syria. It was a fertile region, and Mount Bashan, which is actually a mountain range, was also known as Mount Hermon. Ancient Near Eastern religions considered this northern region to be a dwelling for powerful evil beings, and Mount Hermon was considered to be the gateway to the underworld; to hell. The psalmist accuses the mountain of Bashan of being jealous of the mountain on which Yahweh chooses to dwell in verses 15-16. Verses 17-18 describe Yahweh as a victorious king returning to His throne after defeating His enemies. Paul quotes verse 18 in Ephesians to describe Christ's victory over the evil powers of darkness from this ominous northern region who are God's enemies. Paul sees this victory as that which gives birth and power to the Church. Many see this as a liberation of captives, but this is not about liberation. It is about Jesus' conquest. This is about Jesus' victory and His taking captive the forces of evil which He defeated by His death and resurrection. Jesus puts the evil forces from Bashan 'to an open shame' (ESV) by 'triumphing over them by [the cross] (LEB) (Colossians 2:15).

What about the difference in 'receiving gifts' in the Psalm and Paul changing it to 'giving gifts' in Ephesians? Paul simply highlights the result of Christ's conquest which is the giving of the gifts of strength and power in *Psalm 68:35* to His people. In parading His evil spiritual captives as the victorious King, rather than demanding tribute for Himself, Jesus' distributed the benefits of His conquest to His people, the Church. Specifically, those benefits are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Christ's conquest, when He "ascended

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on high” in *verse 8* at His resurrection, results in the dispensing of gifts to His people. But, what is the descent mentioned in *verses 9-10* [a descent...to the lower, earthly regions (NIV) or to the lower regions, the earth (ESV)]? Some say it was Christ's descent into the underworld after His death on the Cross. Others claim it refers to Jesus' incarnation. However, I think the descent refers to the descent, or outpouring, of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. I come to this conclusion for three reasons. First, Psalm 68 was popularly used by Jews on the Feast of Pentecost. Second, the wording of verses 9-10, especially as translated by the ESV, support this understanding. Lastly, the gifts given to the Church here are by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, especially when we consider other passages in the New Testament. (Heiser, “The Unseen Realm” pp. 292-294). The gifts Christ gives to His people are empowered by His Spirit to build up His Church. So, let us consider these “Gifted Ministers for Mature Growth.”

### **1. READ (Verse 11)**

- a. I like the NASB many of us are using this morning for two reasons.
  - i. First, it highlights that “some” not every body but only certain Christians are gifted in these ways. This is not a rejection that aspects of these gifts by the Holy Spirit are powerfully manifested in other Believers, but these individuals are both gifted for these particular ministries and appointed to certain positions among God's People because of their Spiritual giftedness. So, Jesus gave us “some” people to serve us, His Church, in these roles by the power of His Spirit.
  - ii. Second, “pastor and teacher” seem to go together, and this is present in other Bible translations as well. We will examine the intimate relationship between “pastor and teacher” when we come to it.

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### 2. Apostles

- a. This includes those, such as The Twelve Disciples (Matthias who replaced Judas), James, the brother of Jesus, and the Apostle Paul, who saw Jesus in His resurrected and glorified body and who were especially commissioned and sent by Him. This is a small distinctive group that served as the foundation for the Early Church.

### 3. Prophets

- a. Of course, the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament about the coming of Christ; not least of all John the Baptist. And, while there is a very true sense in which all Christians are apostles (sent as ambassadors of Christ), prophets (speaking on God's behalf) and evangelists (who proclaim the Gospel and make disciples), I do think the prophets mentioned here, like the apostles, had a unique task in the past for building up the Church that does not exist the same way today. There are many things in the Bible that are redemptive-historical and particular to certain points of history as God is revealing something new. We see this in Acts of the Apostles; many events in the early Church that simply are not normative for today; because, they are particular to history (e.g., Agabus *cf. Acts 21:10*).

- i. Here, I admit my own hesitation about modern-day apostles and prophets; especially those that claim to "have a new word from God." This is dangerous and, as we'll see, unnecessary; because, we already have God's Word in the Bible to serve us in this way.

### 4. Evangelists

- a. Very briefly; again, while all Christians are called to evangelize, these evangelists are notably gifted in this area of "gospeling". We all know 'some' among us who have that God-given ability to engage others with the Gospel and win them over to Christ with surprising ease and frequency. Some excel in multicultural environments. Some are sensitive to

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cultural contextualization of the Gospel, and some, as we have seen this week, can plant churches with effective long-term disciple-making relationships that will nurture the maturation of new disciples who will, in-turn, go out and make other disciples.

### **5. Pastors (Shepherds) Teachers**

- a. The Pastors and Teachers, or the Pastor-teacher, is another crucial gift. Pastors, like evangelists, are gifts that Christ continues to bless His Church with in an on-going and regular way for building us up until we reach maturity.
- b. As I mentioned, I think these go together. The teaching aspect is important, and it goes with the pastoring, or shepherding, vocation; because, shepherding God's people and growing them to maturity is accomplished by teaching them God's Word. This is how the Good Shepherd's sheep are fed, so that the Holy Spirit may mature us by His pastor-teachers who are called, equipped and committed to the "ministry of the Word." Actually, all of these vocations (apostle, prophet, evangelist and pastor-teacher) are centered around "the ministry of the Word" which means primarily teaching God's People from the Scriptures. Teaching the Bible is the priority.
  - i. One can be a teacher and not be a pastor, but one cannot be a pastor without also being a teacher.

### **6. Why did Jesus Gift His Church with these "Ministers of the Word"?**

#### **a. READ *Verses 12-16***

- i. Those mentioned in *verse 11* are ministers Jesus gives His Church to equip everyone else to do the work of ministry mentioned in *verses 12-13* with the grace each has been given according to the measure of Christ's gift in *verse 7*.

1. Pastors, are we ministering to the Lord's sheep by feeding them with God's Word that they may

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- grow in the Spirit to use their gifts to minister to God's People as servants of King Jesus?
2. Servants of Jesus, are you submitting to pastors that you may grow in your maturity as a Christian by discerning your gifts and using them to grow the kingdom for God's glory?
    - ii. This maturation process occurs until Jesus Returns, and we all have something to contribute. We need one another for our maturation as Disciples of Christ.
      1. How often do we speak truth in love according to God's Word to one another, so that we may grow up and mature as disciples of Jesus?
    - b. Notice that, while there is victory in Christ as King, there is no complacency for Christians, in general, nor for the minister of the Word in particular. We must be growing into maturity, and the Holy Spirit has gifted the pastors and teachers (or pastor-teacher) to minister to the Church with this goal in mind.
      - i. How many of you willingly and humbly submit to the pastors/presbyters/priests/overseer/bishop Jesus has sanctified by His Spirit and gifted to you to build you up with His Word?

Jesus has Spiritually gifted ministers of the Church to lead disciples of Christ into a mature lived-out faith. Gifts of the Holy Spirit are just that, gifts from God to be used for His glory, and these gifts come to us because of the victory of King Jesus over Satan, sin and death by His resurrection from the dead. The pastor/shepherd teacher is just that; one who is gifted by God to shepherd/lead the Lord's sheep, the Body of Christ, from infancy into maturity by serving them the Word of God.

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Worldly wisdom, human models, procedures, policies, rules...law, will not grow Christians into maturity. They may help with order. They may serve as reminders of good and evil while Christians progress on the righteous path we have been graciously placed. They may even restrain the lawlessness of those among us, but genuine Christians will only grow and mature by God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

How many of us gathered here, however, are still children tossed about by the world's idols and foolishness; by human tricks, craftiness, deceit and scheming?

Do you hunger and thirst for the pure and nourishing Word of God, or are you filling up with the empty calories of worldly ways?

It is up to each Christian disciple as to whether or not you want to feast on God's Word and grow into the image and likeness of our victorious Lord Jesus by His Spirit. Regardless, ministers of the Word must not become preoccupied with managing goats amid the flock by establishing rule-governing boundaries. Rather, ministers of the Word must faithfully under-shepherd the sheep by feeding them with Bible teaching, so that genuine converted Christians may mature into functional Gospel-proclaiming disciples of Jesus. After all, Jesus is the One Who provided His flock with the gift of shepherding and teaching; because, only God's Word with the Gospel focus of Christ as Victorious King will grow His People by His Spirit.

AMEN