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## CHRIST'S PURPOSE FOR HIS CHURCH

Ephesians 4:7-10

By

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Ephesians Lesson 27

## Christ's Purpose for His Church Ephesians 4:7-10

As you probably know, Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* [Zondervan] has become one of the best selling books of all time. I am neither critiquing nor endorsing that book here, but I am raising the question, why has it been so popular? I read an article on the brilliant marketing strategy behind the book's success. But beyond the marketing strategy, it seems that the theme of the book taps into a deeply ingrained human need: We want a meaningful purpose to govern our lives.

What is the point of getting through school? You say, "To get a good job!" What is the point of getting a good job? "To make enough money to support a family and do the things we want to do." So, assume that your marriage stays together and you raise a family. The kids grow up and leave the nest. You retire from your job, enjoy your grandkids, play some golf, catch some fish, drive around the country in your motor home and take videos of all the national parks, get sick and die. What did your life count for? What is the purpose of life?

Every Christian knows that we are here to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But, how do we do that? We glorify God and enjoy Him by living each day in submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ and by using the spiritual gifts that He has given to us to extend His kingdom. The context for exercising these gifts is in the local church, where each member works for the growth of the body, to build itself in love (Eph. 4:16).

Paul has just emphasized the importance of the unity of the spiritual body of Christ. As we saw last time, this is an organic, spiritual unity, founded on seven essential unifying factors, related to the three members of the Trinity (4:4-6). But, unity does not imply uniformity. Paul goes on to show (4:7-16) how the various members of the body have different gifts. As we exercise these gifts under the headship of Jesus Christ, the one body grows in maturity and strength. In our text (4:7-10), Paul is saying that...

The ascended, victorious Christ has given spiritual gifts to His church to extend His sovereign rule over all.

These are not the easiest verses in Ephesians to understand, so stay alert! There are some difficult interpretive matters where I cannot be dogmatic, because godly scholars disagree. But, the overall theme is fairly clear. Paul is showing that Jesus is the ascended, victorious Lord over all and that He has sovereignly given various spiritual gifts to His church so that "He might fill all things" (4:10). As I will explain, that means, "so that He might extend His sovereign rule over all."

1. The ascended, victorious Christ has given spiritual gifts to His church (4:7).

The words, "But to each one," signal the shift from the one body to the individual members of that body. "Grace" is not Paul's usual word for spiritual gifts. But he used the word in this way in 3:2, 7, & 8, where it refers to God's grace that called Paul into his ministry toward the Gentiles. It focuses on God's undeserved favor that took Paul from being a persecutor of the church to an apostle and preacher of the gospel. But, here he says that this same grace extends to "each one of us." Note two things:

- A. Make sure that you have received God's grace in salvation.

"Each one of us" refers to those to whom Paul wrote Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." If you have not been rescued from God's judgment (that's what *saved* means) by God's undeserved favor (*grace*) through faith in Christ's death as your substitute, then nothing else that I am going to say in this message applies to you. You must receive God's gracious gift of eternal life before you receive His gracious spiritual gift that enables you to serve Him. If you think that you can earn salvation by serving God, you do not understand the gospel.

- B. If you have received His grace, the ascended Christ has given you a gift to use in serving Him.

Paul includes himself with all of those to whom he wrote, "to each of *us*." He didn't want anyone to think, "Of course, Paul has

many gifts, but who am I in comparison with him? I don't have any spiritual gifts to speak of." Note four things:

(1) Every believer has been given a gift.

Four chapters in the New Testament talk about spiritual gifts. The significant thing is that each chapter emphasizes that *every* believer has at least one spiritual gift. Romans 12:3: "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." He goes on to talk about some of the various spiritual gifts. In verse 6, he says, "we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us..." So he is saying much the same thing as in Ephesians 4:7, that we all have received a gift; whatever we have is due to God's grace; and, that His grace varies according to His sovereign purpose.

In 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 & 28-30, Paul gives two lists of spiritual gifts. As in Ephesians 4:4-6, he follows a trinitarian outline. Note (1 Cor. 12:4-7): "And there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." After listing some of the gifts, he emphasizes again (12:11), "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills." So twice he states that *each one* has a gift.

Besides Ephesians 4, the other text is 1 Peter 4:10-11, which groups all of the gifts under the general headings of serving gifts and speaking gifts: "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Note, again, *each one*.

So if you have received God's gracious gift of salvation, you have also received His gracious spiritual gift to use for His glory.

- (2) Christ distributes these gifts according to His sovereign purpose.

Paul emphasizes this each time he speaks about spiritual gifts. In Romans 12:3, 6, he mentioned that God has allotted to each a measure of faith and that these gifts differ according to the grace that God has given to us. In 1 Corinthians 12:11, he attributes the distribution of the various gifts to the sovereignty of the Spirit. Here (Eph. 4:7), it is, "according to the measure of Christ's gift." John MacArthur explains (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 135), "The measure or specific portion given is by sovereign design from the Head of the church. The Lord has measured out the exact proportion of each believer's gift...."

I confess that I am sometimes jealous of those who can sing and play musical instruments, but God didn't give me those gifts. I am also jealous of those who are gifted in evangelism, but that isn't my gift. We have to bow before His sovereignty and accept how He has gifted us.

- (3) Since Christ gave these gifts, we must use them as He directs.

He is the sovereign Lord who distributes gifts according to His purpose. Thus we are accountable to Him to use the gifts that He has given as He directs. Contrary to popular opinion, there is no distinction in the New Testament between so-called "clergy" and "laity." It is true that some may be supported so that they can work full time in various ministries (1 Cor. 9:6-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Some are given leadership gifts to equip the rest of the saints for ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). But every Christian is "in the ministry" in the sense that every Christian has a spiritual gift and will give an account to God for how he used it.

In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), Jesus pictured a man about to go on a journey who entrusted five talents to one slave, two to another, and one to yet another. A talent was a measure of money, not an ability to do something special. The man with the five talents went and traded with them and gained five more. The man with the two talents did the same and gained two more. But the man with only one talent hid the money until the master

returned and gave him back his one talent. The master accused that servant of being a wicked, lazy slave and ordered that he be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That's a frightening parable, in that the lazy servant goes to hell! (I didn't make it up; Jesus did.) Two brief observations: First, the danger is for the person who isn't given much to bury his talent. If you think, "I can't do much for the Lord, so I won't do anything," take heed! Second, not to serve the Lord in any capacity is an indication that you are not truly saved. If the one talent guy had used the talent to gain another one, he would have shown that he was a true servant of his master. He would have faithfully used what the master gave him. But by not using it at all and spending his time on his own selfish pursuits, he showed that he was not a true servant. So each of us needs carefully to consider, what gifts has the Lord entrusted to me and how does He want me to use them for His kingdom purposes?

- (4) Using your gifts to serve Christ is an undeserved privilege.

Paul emphasizes this by repeating the terms, "grace," "given," and "gift" (4:7). Because our spiritual gifts were given to us by grace, there is no place for boasting. As Paul asks rhetorically (1 Cor. 4:7), "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"

Also, there is no place for grumbling when you serve the Lord. The very fact that you, a former rebel, are serving the Lord Jesus Christ, is pure grace! Think of where you could be, without hope and without God in this world (Eph. 2:12), living for vain pleasures and headed toward eternal punishment. When you're tempted to quit serving the Lord because someone hurt your feelings or didn't appreciate you as much as he should have, stop and think about the undeserved privilege of serving Him!

But, serving Christ, especially if we should be persecuted as Paul was, only makes sense if Christ is who He claimed to be. So Paul goes on to show that...

2. Christ's humiliation and victorious ascension qualify Him to give these spiritual gifts to His church (4:8-10).

This is where things get difficult, so stay with me! Paul makes three points, one in each verse (8, 9, & 10):

A. Psalm 68:18 pictures Christ's victorious ascension (4:8).

Paul cites Psalm 68:18, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." As I will comment on in a moment, Paul changes one key word, "received," to "gave." It is a psalm of David and is difficult to follow in places. But one scholar sums it up (Richard A. Taylor, "The Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 in Light of the Ancient Versions, *Bibliotheca Sacra* [July-September, 1991], p. 322), "The overarching message of the psalm is that God is to be praised as the One whose past acts of deliverance and provision for His people give confidence of His continuing care for His people. The message of verse 18 in particular is that in the person of the victorious king (or possibly in the location of the ark of the covenant) God ascended Zion in triumph over His enemies, receiving from submissive peoples congratulatory gifts of honor." So Paul takes this verse about a victorious Israelite king leading his captives in triumphal procession, receiving gifts of booty and applies it to the victorious, ascended Christ in relation to His church.

Note several things. First, Psalm 68:18 in its context obviously refers to the Lord ascending and Paul applies it directly to Christ. This is seen very clearly if you read through the entire psalm, but to be brief, note just verses 17 & 18: "The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness. You have ascended on high, You have led captive Your captives; You have received gifts among men, even among the rebellious also, that the Lord God may dwell there." The poetic picture is that the Lord's people were in trouble and the Lord came down and delivered them. Then He ascended again into heaven as the victorious warrior. Paul applies this directly to Christ.

Second, the verse pictures Christ ascending into heaven after securing victory over His enemies. This includes Satan and his evil hosts, as Christ defeated them at the cross (Col. 2:15). But it may also allude to all of us who were formerly his enemies, but who were brought into willing submission at the cross. We are now His willing captives, ready to obey the One that we formerly hated.

Third, after His ascension, Jesus gave gifts to His church. The picture is of a victorious warrior, receiving spoil after his victory and then distributing that spoil as gifts to his people. (Peter expresses a similar idea of the ascended Christ's receiving and giving in Acts 2:33.) The difficult issue to decide is, why did Paul change "received" from Psalm 68:18 into "gave" in our text? The bottom line (after reading many different proposed solutions) is that no one knows for sure!

Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Eph. 4:8, p. 273) points out that Paul sometimes does not quote the exact words of the Old Testament, but rather conveys the substance of it in his own language (see, also, Frank Thielman, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [Baker], ed. by G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson, p. 823). So here, Paul may be drawing an analogy from the psalm that did not contradict the sense of the original context. When a victorious king received booty, he would distribute that booty among his loyal subjects.

But, Calvin is inclined to a different opinion, that Paul purposely changed the word to adapt the psalm to his own purpose in Ephesians. He suggests that Paul is drawing a comparison between the greater and the less. The lesser is seen in an earthly king who gathers spoils from the vanquished. But Christ's victory and ascension is greater in that He graciously gives His bounty to His people.

However you explain Paul's change of words, his overall point is that Psalm 68:18, which clearly refers to the Lord God, pictures Christ's victorious ascension.

- B. Christ's victorious ascension assumes that He first descended into the lower parts of the earth (4:9).

In verse 9, Paul is reasoning that if Christ ascended, He first had to descend. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus (John 3:13), "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man." Jesus claimed to have come down from heaven to this earth, sent by the Father (see John 6:33, 38, 51, 58). So when He ascended into heaven, Jesus was returning to the place where He dwelled before the foundation of the world (John 6:62).

But, what does Paul mean when he says, "the lower parts of the earth"? There are three options. Some say that it simply means,

“the earth as contrasted with heaven.” (The NIV translates it this way.) Or, some take it to refer to Jesus’ descent into Hades during the time between His death and resurrection (based on one interpretation of 1 Pet. 3:18-20). Or, it could refer to the grave, which is my preference. So the idea here is parallel to Philippians 2:5-11, where Paul states that Jesus laid aside the glory that He had in heaven and took on the form of a bond-servant. He became obedient even to death on a cross. Therefore (Phil. 2:9), “God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name.” So Ephesians 4:9 shows us that the risen, ascended Jesus is qualified to bestow spiritual gifts on His church because He came to this earth willingly to go to the cross.

- C. Christ’s victorious ascension places Him above all powers, so that He may reign through His church (4:10).

Paul concludes (4:10), “He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.” The idea of this verse is similar to Philippians 2:9-11, but in the context of Ephesians, it takes us back to 1:20-21, where Paul states that after God raised Jesus from the dead, He was seated in heaven, far above all rule and authority. He then adds (1:22-23), “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Jesus’ filling all in all, or all things, refers to His sovereign rule over all. The connection with the church shows that Jesus exercises His sovereign rule and displays His spiritual presence through the church. As we live in submission to Jesus’ lordship, the world gets a glimpse of that future day when He will reign supreme. The world should see in the church a display of that yet future kingdom, when He will rule over all as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:15-16). As we exercise the spiritual gifts that the ascended, victorious Savior has given to us, we help to extend His sovereign rule over all before He comes to reign supremely.

### Conclusion

Four applications stem from these difficult, but important verses:

*\*(1) To extend Christ's sovereign rule over all, I must begin with me. Am I living daily under His sovereign rule? Am I obedient to Christ, beginning on the thought level? Am I seeking to know Him and His will through His Word so that I can obey Him?*

*\*(2) To extend Christ's sovereign rule over all, I must be committed to the local church, where I must discover and exercise the gifts that He has given to me. It is through the church, locally expressed, that Christ fills all in all (Eph. 1:23). If all you do is attend a weekly church service, but you're not involved in using your gifts to serve, you are not fulfilling Christ's purpose for your life.*

*\*(3) To extend Christ's sovereign rule over all, I must engage in spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness. These verses are steeped in warfare terminology (which will be further developed in 6:10-20). When you use your gifts to serve Christ, you are engaging the spiritual forces of wickedness in battle. Satan does not want to see Christ's kingdom extended through an obedient church. So don't be naive. Serving Christ is not a Sunday School picnic! It is warfare and you need to be armed and ready for combat. Often the wounds come from friendly fire, not directly from the enemy!*

*\*(4) To extend Christ's sovereign rule over all is to engage in a battle that will ultimately succeed. You will grow weary in the battle. You will often feel as if your efforts are not accomplishing anything of lasting value. You will often feel like quitting. When you get wounded, you will be tempted to drop out of any kind of service. At such times, remember Paul's climatic words at the end of his great chapter on the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:58), "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."*

Christ's victorious ascension means that His church will triumph with Him. We will display and share in His glory. But for now, we must engage in the battle by using the gracious spiritual gifts that He has given to us. That is our God-given purpose!

## Application Questions

1. How can a believer discover what his spiritual gifts are? Do we have only one, or more than one? Cite Scripture.
2. What are the dangers in the common notion that there is a distinction between clergy and laity? Are there any valid aspects of this distinction?
3. Why must a believer's purpose in life be tied in to the local church? Are we as American believers too individualistic?
4. How would our church be different if every member viewed himself or herself as a servant with a ministry to fulfill?

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