

Introduction

There have been numerous television characters that evoke an immediate response in people who watch the relevant shows. Take the name “Dwight Schrute”—or formerly, “Dwight *Schrude*”. The name sounds like a guy you want to punch, doesn’t it? The name sounds like a guy who would lose the spelling bee to a kid named Raj Patel by misspelling the word “failure” in front of the entire school (Season 2). He sounds like a guy who knows entirely too much about beet farming and pretends to be a cop when he’s home alone, but also is a guy who, deep down and usually hidden somewhere, can be kind and tender toward others. But mostly a guy you want to punch.

There are many TV character names that evoke strong responses in people. Tony Soprano. Walter White. Chandler Bing. Dr. House. *Negan*. (I’m not recommending any of these TV shows for you. I haven’t actually seen most of these.) One of my wife’s favorite characters is Leslie Knope from “Parks & Rec”.

Leslie Knope is a quirky and devoted employee of the Parks and Recreation Department in fictional Pawnee, Indiana. She is dedicated and tireless. As the Deputy Director of the department, she loves everything about her job and seeks to make a substantial difference in the lives of her community and especially her coworkers.

One of Leslie’s more endearing—and frankly, ridiculous—qualities is her gift-giving ability. No matter the occasion Leslie gives the perfect gift. She would never buy a gift card (not that there’s anything wrong with a gift card; a gift card may well be the perfect gift for someone). Her gifts usually aren’t luxurious or even all that expensive. In fact, they’re often really simple.

She once gave her boss, Ron Swanson, a perfect gift for him: a day of solitude. She led him to an unoccupied office with a large TV, his favorite movies, and a variety of steaks, bacon, and burgers, along with his favorite whiskey. Okay. That one was expensive and luxurious as she hired a chef. *But it was perfect for him*.

She was known for giving scrapbooks with perfect memorabilia in it, whether for birthdays or anniversaries. She put together elaborate gift baskets with items specific to the recipient’s interests. She wrote personal letters and organized surprise parties. She was the perfect gift-giver. The way in which she gave gifts revealed not only something of the interests and desires—and *needs* of the recipients—it also revealed the character of the giver of those gifts.

Over the next three weeks we’ll be looking at the issue of gifts given to the church. We’ll begin today by looking at a text that reveals something about the Giver of those gifts. This is a seemingly obscure text that many simply gloss over as they read through the letter. It may not be immediately clear why Paul includes it. Rather than throw-away statements, his declaration in these four verses is profound for what it means for us to be the church and for what it means that God is the giver of gifts. We’re in Ephesians 4.

Eph 4:7 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.)

Ephesians 4:7–10

Each One

Throughout chapters 2 and 3 Paul has been stressing the unity of the church. Outside the church there are myriad things that cause division, that cause people to separate into groups that do not intermingle. These include racial or ethnic distinctions, socio-economic distinctions, food preferences, musical styles. *Political parties*. In the church none of these can truly divide for the Spirit of God has united God's people together in one body. Paul urges them to *maintain* this unity, not *create* it.

The basis for this unity is the Trinitarian faith we have received. We saw last week there is one body and one Spirit who has given us one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. There is one God and Father of all. It is because of who God is and what he has done—and is doing!—that we have unity in the one body by the one Spirit. The unity of God's people is not merely a *characteristic* God desires from his people; it is central to the work of God in Christ through his Spirit.

As we saw last week, to act in a manner that threatens this unity is to act in opposition to the work of God in Christ through his Spirit. It is to *oppose God*. To seek to stand toe-to-toe with God by bringing about division over things that ought not divide the people of God is a dangerous activity.

After emphasizing the wholeness of the one body that is the local church, Paul shifts direction, but only slightly. In verse 7 he says, "But grace was given to each one of us". We saw last week a series of "ones": one body, one Spirit, one hope; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all. This emphasizes the unity of the whole. Here Paul adds another "one": to each one of us.

The body is united, yet the body is made up of individual parts. Paul doesn't want the Ephesians to lose sight of the fact that while they are one body, the body is made up of parts, and *the parts matter*. His point is simple and direct: each and every person who makes up the local church has received grace. The grace he means here is the same sort of grace he mentions in chapter 3 where he says God's grace was given to him that he might preach the gospel to the nations.

God's grace has not only saved his people, it has gifted them. This is his point in verse 7. To each one of us grace has been given. That is, each and every single follower of Christ has been empowered by the Spirit of God in some way. Peter tells us in his first letter these gifts fall into two broad categories: speaking gifts and serving gifts. Whatever the gift may be, it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit to either utter words that bless or engage in activities that bless.

There is not a single follower of Jesus who has not been gifted in some way. Paul is clear: grace was given to *each one of us*. Everyone has a spiritual gift. However, he points out as

well that this gift is “according to the measure of Christ’s gift”. That is, the Spirit of God has gifted each one of us, and has gifted us to a unique degree. There is no hierarchy of gifts here; the sovereign Lord has determined to give gifts and he has determined the degree to which a person is gifted. Two people may each have the gift of evangelism but that does not mean they are gifted to the same degree. One may be more fruitful in that gift, according to God’s purposes.

There is no hierarchy here. No one can claim that his or her gift is better or more important than the gift of another, and no one can claim the degree to which he or she is gifted is more important than the degree to which another is gifted. There is one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father of all. We are called together in unity, to be *one* body. Our diversity extends beyond our skin tone and our age and our financial status. It includes our spiritual gifting, and in the midst of our diverse spiritual gifts there is still God’s profound unity.

Therefore It Says

In verse 8 Paul writes, “Therefore it says”, and sort of quotes Psalm 68. This is not a typical introduction of a quote by Paul. Most often when Paul quotes the Scriptures he writes something like, “As it is written”, or “the Scripture says”, or maybe “for it is written”. Something’s different here, and it’s likely that Paul isn’t actually quoting but summarizing a portion of Scripture.

He’s referring to Psalm 68, which is a psalm praising YHWH God of Israel who is the victorious Divine Warrior. It begins with a startling declaration: “God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him!” God then pursues his enemies and overcomes them. He also rescues those in need of rescue. The psalm proclaims him ⁵ “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”

He is the Divine Warrior who comes in power to rescue the needy and to defeat his enemies. Then Paul does something strange with verse 18. Here is what it says:

Ps 68:18 You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.

Psalm 68:18

Here the psalm has the Lord *receiving* gifts. In verse 8 of our text he writes:

Eph 4:8 Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

Ephesians 4:8

The psalm says the Divine Warrior *receives* gifts but Paul says he *gives* gifts. Is Paul misquoting the psalm? If you ever have trouble sleeping, I can send you a list of academic articles trying to explain what is happening here. I think the simplest explanation is the best one, and that is Paul is not *quoting* the psalm—at least not in the sense that we think of quoting something. Paul is *summarizing* the psalm. It ends with this:

Ps 68:35 Awesome is God from his sanctuary; the God of Israel—he is the one who gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!
Psalm 68:35

The Divine Warrior who is victorious has taken from his spoils of war and has given gifts to his people. Notice what he gives: power and strength! Paul is smushing this together with verse 18 of the psalm to say that God has taken those he has captured and led them on parade when he ascended and has given gifts to his people. These gifts are manifestations of power and strength—manifestations of *the Spirit*.

He Also Descended

As he has done several times in this letter, Paul seems to interrupt himself to clarify something, and what he clarifies is significant. I've read this text countless times since I first read it as a teenager, and it's no more immediately clear now that it was then, but I know this: it's not a diversion, but a fuller explanation. Keep in mind the context. Though Jews and Gentiles—and countless other groups—were hostile to one another and were deeply divided along racial and ethnic and social lines, in Christ they are brought together in the local church. In the midst of their profound diversity, they are united in the one God, the one Lord, the one Spirit.

In light of this, Paul references the psalm. Let me make an important point before we look at what he says. Paul is applying this psalm to the Lord Jesus. The apostles did this with the entirety of the Old Testament Scriptures. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul says Christ is our Passover lamb. The story of the exodus from Egypt was not about Jesus but about the people of Israel being rescued from Egypt. The lambs that were slaughtered protected them from the angel of death.

Hear me clearly: the Scriptures all point to Jesus, even though not all the Scriptures are *about* Jesus. The story of Israel's exodus from Egypt is not Christocentric—but it is Christotelic. That is, the story of the exodus is not directly about Jesus, yet the story of the exodus points us to Christ, who is the ultimate fulfillment of Israel. He is the true Israel and is the fulfillment of all the promises of God. Again, to be very clear, in Luke 24 Jesus interprets the Old Testament Scriptures for his disciples, and in doing so Luke says “he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself”.

What Paul is doing is showing how Psalm 68 reveals Jesus. In the psalm the Lord God ascends the mountain where he is seated on his throne. Paul says this is really pointing to the reality of Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven. The Divine Warrior conquered an even greater enemy and ascended after his victory, only this time the ascent wasn't to a mountain.

Paul asks what the psalm means when it says “he ascended”, except that it requires he first “descend” to something. It's sort of a “what-goes-up-must-come-down” thing, but in reverse. In order for God to *ascend* he must first have *descended*. God has always been high and lifted up; in order for him to “go up” he must first have “come down”. This means, of course, that the Lord God became one of us and lived among us and died in our place. Then he conquered death—he is victorious! After conquering death he ascended into heaven.

He had to, by the way. Jesus said in John 16 that after his resurrection he “must go away”—he must ascend back into heaven, for if he did not ascend, the Spirit of God would not come down upon his people. Remember the psalm: “Awesome is God from his sanctuary; the God of Israel—he is the one who gives power and strength to his people”. The Lord Jesus ascended far above all the heavens—into his sanctuary. From his sanctuary he gives power and strength to his people. From his sanctuary the risen and ascended Lord sent his Spirit to dwell among his people.

The Spirit of God mediates the presence of Jesus among his people. Paul ends this section by saying the purpose of the Lord’s ascension was “that he might fill all things”. We saw in chapter 2 we, the local church, “are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit”. He says in chapter 3 he prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” and “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”. The conquering Divine Warrior who has ascended has given gifts to his people that are manifestations of his power and strength through the Holy Spirit.

Sovereign Lord

When we began I told you this text was one most of us have probably skimmed past in our Bible reading plans. We get to Ephesians 4 and pay attention to verses 1-6, then our eyes glaze over a bit before focusing on verse 11 and beyond. His point in these four verses is not merely a clarification and it certainly isn’t an unnecessary add-on; it’s essential to his point throughout this chapter.

So what is his point? Paul’s point is this: Christ is sovereign over all. He cites Psalm 68 for this. This psalm is about the victory of YHWH God of Israel over his enemies. It is about the sovereign care for his people as demonstrated in him being “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows”. It is about God who “provide[s] for the needy”. It is about the Lord God who, with his limitless and unstoppable power, has given gifts to his people—power and strength in abundance.

We have an excursus coming next Sunday. This is a more focused study on just verse 11. We will see something extraordinary, and Paul is laying the groundwork in our text. God, in his sovereign power, has created his church and determined it would be the very thing he uses to reveal his glory to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. To this church the Sovereign Lord, the victorious Divine Warrior who leads his captives and gives gifts of power and strength to his people, has actually given to his church *people*. That is, *people* are the spiritual gifts.

Paul says grace was given to each and every one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. We need to recognize Paul’s emphasis here. If you read this in the original language, he’s being very emphatic. In English we tend to add the word “one” in a similar way. The meaning of “given to each” and “given to each one” isn’t really different. What is different is the emphasis. Just as Paul had used the word “one” seven times in the previous verses, he uses it again in our text to emphasize the unity of the whole body made up of diverse parts.

He adds verses 7–10 to to emphasize the basis for this unity in the one body by the one Spirit: Christ is the Sovereign Lord who reigns over all. The evidence of his sovereign victory is giving gifts. These gifts are the spoils of war, and because Christ is victorious, he

has limitless spoils to share. We have seen this idea of the victorious Christ throughout the entire letter. In chapter 1 Paul tells us about it when he prays for them:

Eph 1:18 ...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Ephesians 1:18–21

Here Paul connects his resurrection and ascension as the moment of victory for the Lord Jesus. This is when he defeated all his enemies and won the victory. This is what Paul means when he quotes the psalm and its declaration that when Christ ascended he led a host of captives. The Sovereign Lord revealed his great power in his definitive victory over his enemies.

A host of Captives

He led a “host of captives” in his victory parade. Who are these captives? In the original context of the psalm it would have been the defeated foes—the enemies of Israel. In our present context it includes the hostile spiritual forces of evil. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Colossians:

Col 2:15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.
Colossians 2:15

At the resurrection and ascension of Christ, he clearly defeated the enemies of God. All of them. There is not a single enemy of God who was not defeated at the cross of Christ, when he walked out of his tomb in victory. His ascension into heaven was his coronation as he was once again seated on his throne as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Remember when we looked at chapter 1 and Paul kept stumbling over his words, piling them up, trying to express just how much authority belongs to Christ and just how high above all others he is? He is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion”, Paul said. There is no one who is not under the ultimate rule and authority of Christ.

As Paul interprets Psalm 68 Christologically, he certainly understands this victory over hostile spiritual forces. He understands just how far this victory extends, and he understands over whom this victory was:

Eph 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among

whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:1–7

Church! We are the defeated enemies of God, yet through Christ we have been adopted into God's family as sons of God, and we are heirs of the Father's vast and limitless riches! When the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven and led a host of captives, he was on his victory parade and showing off the spoils of war, and the treasures he captured were *us*. When he ascended, he was leading us on parade directly to his Father! Only a victory that was truly complete and total could transform enemies into his friends. Christ has conquered our rebellious wills, that he might "show off" via his church, demonstrating the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Application

I said in the beginning that today's text is one most of us—all of us?—have simply glossed over as we've read Ephesians 4, given its strange complexity. It's not immediately obvious why Paul includes it. The number of words written about this text far outweighs the amount of time most of us have spent trying to understand what Paul is doing in the text. So many have engaged in high-level academic and rigorous study to try to comprehend it. Too often an academic and intellectual pursuit for meaning has obscured Paul's real meaning. Paul may be hard to understand, but the gospel isn't.

The gospel of Jesus is this: God turns his enemies into his friends. He makes those who were once opposed to him and indifferent to him and dismissive of him into his beloved sons who are heirs of his vast estate. Upon these, upon those who were once hostile toward him, he pours out mercy and grace and gives gifts to them. These gifts are the perfect gifts, for God knows what his people need so he crafts the perfect gifts for them.

The Son of God came down from heaven, taking on the form of a man, that he might live and die and rise again. When he ascended into heaven to be seated on his throne, he led a host of captives. He led a victory parade of all those he had purchased for his Father. As Jesus said in John 6, all the Father gives him will come to him, and whoever comes to him he will never cast out. He came to do his Father's will and his Father's will is this: that he should lose nothing of what the Father has given him, but raise it up on the last day.

This is what chapters 1–3 have been saying. Paul has been explaining the incredible activity of God to save his people. He saves his people through the blood of Jesus. This salvation, however, is not a one-time event. God saves a person into his church where his Spirit dwells, and he continues his work of transforming that person through his church. To ensure this happens, God gives the perfect gifts to his church: his people.

Keep in mind the context of our passage. God has done an incredible work in Christ through his Spirit and he calls his people to sit in that truth, to rest in the gospel. While his people sit in the truth of the gospel, they are also to walk in that same truth. We must walk in a manner worthy of our calling, and our calling is into the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. This is because there is one body and one Spirit and one hope. This is because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. This is because there is one God and Father of all.

This is because to each and every one of us grace has been given according to the measure of Christ's gift. When the Lord Jesus ascended on high he gave gifts to his people. He sent his Spirit to dwell among us, that he might pour out power and strength to us. This power and strength comes in the form of spiritual gifts, which are really and truly spiritually gifted *people*.

Church, you are the gifts Christ has given. You. Each and every one of you. We will see in a few weeks that unless each part of the body is working properly, the body will never be its fullest self. Without each part—that is, *each one of us*—working properly, the one body can never be fully healthy.

Some of you may not know what your particular spiritual gift is. Let me be very clear: you are the gift. You are one of the many gifts the victorious Divine Warrior who ascended into heaven has given to his church. We may not know what your particular manifestation of the Spirit is, but *you* are the gift. This is why we emphasize participation in the body of Christ. Being here in the gathered assembly is important because you are important. We're not trying to "pad our stats", so to speak. We understand how necessary you are.

Being involved in your City Group is important because the Lord Jesus has given gifts to your City Group and when you aren't there, they are missing a gift given by the risen and ascended Christ. Being involved in each others' lives outside of the gathered assembly and our small groups is important because the Lord has given gifts to his people and when we keep those gifts to ourselves, we are robbing the church of the gifts Christ has given.

Can you imagine getting a Christmas gift for your child, a gift your child absolutely desires, a gift that is *perfect* for your child—*Leslie Knope perfect*—but then you unwrap it and merely show it to your kid. Then you tell your kid you'll keep the gift you are "giving" to your child in your bedroom closet on the top shelf. I mean, we don't want it to get broken, do we? We don't want it to get worn out, do we? We don't want it to get dirty, do we? This is how some treat the gifts Christ has given. You keep it to yourself and hide it away from everyone else, bringing it out occasionally to remind people what they're missing. In the words of Greta, "How dare you?"

There are those who know their spiritual gifts. They know how the Spirit is manifested in their words or in their service. To you I also want to be very clear: you are the gift. You are one of the many gifts the victorious Divine Warrior who ascended into heaven has given to his church. Never allow your gift to be a substitute for *you*.

I know a man—he's not at New City—who struggles to be connected to his church because he believes he has the gift of giving. He loves to give to his church and he loves to give to help others in the church. He's very generous with his money. He loves to write checks, but he won't sit on anyone's couch. He refuses, for he doesn't—in his words—want to be covered in anyone's dog hair. He's forgotten that *he* is the gift.

If you know your spiritual gift remember that *you* are the gift! To truly give yourself to the Lord and to his people you must be involved in the life of the church. Whether you serve

behind the scenes or you have a speaking gift, show up to City Group. Speak up in City Group. Spend time on each other's couches. Join us on Sundays at 9:00 for prayer. Have a meal together. Watch the game together. Give yourselves to one another, for the Lord Jesus has already given you as gifts to each other.

The best gifts are things that are most precious to us. Think of that. The best gifts are things that are best suited for the recipient but are also meaningful to the giver. This is true of the Lord as well, and he gives us. We go from being enemies of God to being his captives, but not enemy combatants on parade. God captures us and transforms us and adopts us as his sons.

Further, he gives us the most amazing task there is: we are given to reflect his glory. Remember what Paul says in chapter 3. It is through *the church* the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. To ensure this happens, the Lord has given gifts to the church and these gifts consist of the people who make up the church—the diverse people who have been united in one body by one Spirit with one hope, who have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, who are sons of one God and Father of all. And he has given each *one* of us.