

Text: Ephesians 4:7-13

Title: “Our Helpers Along the Avenue”

Open your Bibles to Ephesians 4. We’ve been camped in this portion of God’s Word to learn about the way of life we’ve been called to as believers. This chapter opens with a clear challenge to live ... to walk ... a certain way ... a way I have been calling “The Avenue.”

Ephesians 4:1 - As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

If there was ever a time that our nation and our neighbors needed to see us living this way, it is now. Luke warm Christianity ... stale “church-ianity” just won’t do. We must step into what Jesus called the narrow way and to live, walk, worthy of the calling we have received in Christ.

We go on to see that while it is our personal responsibility to live this life (to walk in this way), we cannot do this alone. We are called to walk along this avenue with others. God has so created and configured the church to become the AVENUE by which believers grow into the fullness of the life of Christ. And it is good for us to come to this portion of Ephesians 4 on this particular day in the life of our church because it is a clear reminder to us all about our roles in the church, my role as the pastor and your role as the congregation of saints. **Read Ephesians 4:7-13.**

So we’re moving along this avenue striving to attain to what Paul calls here “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” We’re talking here about growth in Christlikeness. So when the church functions properly according to God’s desire and design the result will be that we will all grow toward Christlikeness. We’re not saved to sit and soak in church until we go to heaven. No we are saved to admonish and encourage one another toward maturity in Christ and in the service to Christ.

THE AVENUE GRAPHIC - And in response to this our church has developed what we call “The Avenue” to remind us all that we should be striving toward progress in our own personal lives ... and we should be helping others to do the same. As the graphic shows it all starts with the “I Am a Guest” intersection where we want our guests to feel the welcoming love of Jesus Christ. At the “I Am a Member” intersection we want to make sure that everyone knows Christ and is a member of the family of God through personal salvation and then become a member of the Body of Christ (the church) through believer’s baptism and church membership. Christ wants us to be deliberately connected to a local body of believers where we are all moving along The Avenue toward the next intersection, “I Am a Disciple.” This is what Paul describes in that phrase “to the full measure of the fullness of Christ.” After all, according to Christ, our main mission is to make disciples. Our mission then is to know, follow and share Jesus Christ.

Again, God created and configured the church to be the community where we are all growing together into maturity in Christ. We are not independent, individual believers. We are interdependent believers who need others in order to mature in our faith.

ILLUSTRATION – The Christian life is a team sport, not an individual sport like golf. In golf, the player (unless he chooses to use a caddie) can do it all himself. He chooses the club, hits the shot, walks to his ball and does it all over again. Now in baseball it's different, isn't it? The pitcher is important, but he can't do it all alone. Can you just imagine how silly it is to think of a pitcher throwing the ball, then running and catching it behind the plate? Or if the batter hits the ball, after the pitcher throws the pitch he has to run to the outfield to try to catch the ball that is hit, or tag someone out at second. That's ridiculous in baseball and it's ridiculous in the church.

We need each other to grow to maturity to where we are fulfilling our unique calling in life and ministry. The body of Christ is built up and we become strong in our service to Christ and to the world that needs the Gospel. Whatever you think church should be, it must square with this.

The Scriptures show us how Christ intends to bring believers to this spiritual maturity in Christ.

1. CHRIST GIFTS ALL BELIEVERS FOR MINISTRY.

Ephesians 4:7 - But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

The following verses show us that this grace that is given to us is in the form of what Paul calls "gifts" or "spiritual gifts." So when you are saved Christ gives you His Holy Spirit, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit comes the ability to live the life we are called to live in Christ ... to walk in a way worthy of the calling we have received. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to read our Bibles and understand what God is saying to us. The Holy Spirit helps us to pray. The Holy Spirit gives us strength to endure trials and temptations. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us, making us more and more like Jesus in our attitudes and actions. And by the Holy Spirit we are connected to one another to form the Body of Christ, the church. This is what is called the fellowship of the Spirit. And along with all of this, the Holy Spirit deposited in our lives these spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are supernatural abilities, separate from our natural talents or skills, though our spiritual gifts and our natural talents work hand in hand. There are different places in the NT where these we have listings and descriptions of various gifts. Let's just look at one of those passages in Romans 12:6-8.

Romans 12:6a - We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

Then Paul goes on to give a sampling of these gifts.

Romans 12:6b-8 - If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

So there you get a little idea of how spiritual gifts function in the church. Now back to Ephesians 4 we see:

THE GIFTS ARE INDIVIDUALLY GIVEN.

Ephesians 4:7 - But to each one of us grace has been given...

1 Corinthians 12:7 - Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given...

No believer has been excluded. God intends to use every member of the church to build up the church. Our church will never reach its potential until we are all released for and engaged in ministry of various kinds.

THE GIFTS ARE GRACIOUSLY GIVEN.

Ephesians 4:7a - But to each one of us grace has been given...

Romans 12:6a - We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

The grace of God saves us, but also enables us to live the life we are called to live, including the ministry that He wants us to have to others using our gifts. And because they are distributed to believers by God's grace they are for God's glory. We should thank God for the gifts that flow out of other's lives.

THE GIFTS ARE BENEFICIALLY GIVEN.

Now because these gifts are by the grace of God they are used to minister His grace to others.

1 Corinthians 12:7 - Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

1 Peter 4:10a - Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others...

Hopefully by now you realize that this won't work if all a member does is attend a worship service. Yes, our worship experiences are an important part of our life as the people of God. We offer our praises together to our great God and King. But for the church to function like a body, you have to go deeper than that. For you to move from "I Am a Guest" to "I Am a Member" to "I Am a Disciple" requires that you become part of a small group where you can interact with other believers. Our basic small group process is called Sunday Bible Study. Of course it is Bible study, but it is much more than that. It is here that you get to know other believers and they get to know you. Encouragement and care happens in these groups. Growing into the fullness of the life of Christ will not happen for you merely hanging out on the fringes of church

life. You can go to our website or come to the Welcome Center on Sundays and we'll help you get connected.

THE GIFTS ARE SOVEREIGNLY GIVEN.

Ephesians 4:7 - But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

“As Christ apportioned it...” means that Christ has measured out the exact proportions of each believer's gift or gifts. And He blends my gifts with your gifts in just the right measure necessary for our church to accomplish the unique work we have to do. Christ does this in His sovereignty and wisdom so that our work can be done effectively.

We will reach our full potential as a church when each of us serves in the area where we are sovereignly gifted by God. God has a unique work and witness for our church in our city. And He has deposited you in our church to help accomplish that work. But if you are not in your place, it will be so much harder for us to accomplish that work.

ILLUSTRATION – A few months ago we had a storm in our neighborhood that blew over a part of my backyard fence. It was going to be a while before the guys could get out to repair the fence so I thought, “I'll give it a go.” The first thing that had to be done was to bust out the concrete where the old fence post broke off. I thought, “That shouldn't be too hard to do.” I took my shovel and a little pick and started in on it. After about an hour I calculated that at this pace I would have this done in about four years. I was ready to quit. Suddenly my neighbor walked up and said, “I see you're trying to bust out that concrete. Here, try this.” And he handed me a rock bar ... a six-foot long rod made out of steel that weighs maybe 50 pounds. And so I gave it a try, and sure enough, using the proper tool I started making some progress.

You see, if I'm serving in an area where I am not gifted it's like me trying to bust out concrete with a rake or a hoe. But if I'm serving with the gifts Christ has sovereignly given me, then it's much more powerful and effective. It's so frustrating and exhausting to do something that you're not equipped and gifted to do. But when the ongoing ministry of the church falls on the shoulders of a small minority in the church that's inevitably what happens.

And this is no secondary issue for Christ or for the church. In fact this is part of Christ's great work of redemption.

Read Ephesians 4:8-10.

Paul quotes Psalm 68 and then draws a picture that would have been easily understood by Paul's first-century readers. When a general won a great victory the returning army would march into the city led by the victorious general in a grand, glorious procession. And in this long parade would come the prisoners of war, those who had been captured by the victorious army. And those captives would often be seen carrying the treasures that had been captured by the conquering general and his army. And those treasures would then be distributed as gifts to the soldiers and others throughout the kingdom.

And this is what Christ has done in His great victory of redemption. Christ is our glorious conqueror. After He accomplished the overwhelming victory on the Cross of Calvary and through His resurrection from the dead, conquering sin and death and Satan, Christ ascended back to heaven. And as He ascended back to heaven, like a glorious conqueror He gave gifts to believers. How did He do that? Remember that a few weeks after He ascended back to heaven, Christ sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to indwell all believers here on earth. And part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as I said earlier, is to release and enable all believers to do ministry through the gifts that have been distributed to each of us by our conquering general Jesus Christ.

I hope that encourages you. Lift up your head. You have something Christ has gifted you to do. You have a purpose!

Now, just because we have gifts doesn't mean that we know how and where to use those gifts. And that's why Paul doesn't stop there. Christ gifts all believers for ministry, but also...

2. CHRIST PREPARES ALL BELIEVERS FOR MINISTRY.

He does this through gifted people that He gives to the church. Some of the gifts given by the exalted Christ by the Holy Spirit were given to certain individuals who were themselves gifts to the church.

Ephesians 4:11 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,

Why did Christ do this?

Ephesians 4:12 - to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

Now I'll pick up here next week, but just think of the potential of our church with these gifts supernaturally and sovereignly distributed to us by Christ. Imagine what would happen if we each determined, "I will not squander this gift that has been given to me. I will use it for the glory of my King and for the good of His Kingdom."