

Title: Grace Filled Commitment
Text: Ephesians 4:7-15
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One of my least favorite tasks is fast approaching. Sometime in last November or early December Sue will ask me again and again, 'Have you done it yet?' I will get annoyed, she will get frustrated and eventually I will do as I am told, I mean, asked.

I will write our families Christmas Letter.

What's the big deal about writing a Christmas letter? Why do I procrastinate until the last possible minute before writing it? The reasons lay in the nature of my family. I come from a big extended family on my Father's side. I have lots of uncles and aunties and dozens of cousins. And here is the amazing thing; compared with most of them, I have a shy and retiring personality. In short, my paternal relatives are a bunch of loud-mouth, competitive show offs – and no more do they show off than in their epic Christmas letters. They are long, involved and tear-inducingly funny. Anything I write seems pathetic by comparison.

The nature of a Christmas letters is that it is written for a wide audience. We send out between 50 and a hundred, writing the name of the recipient on the top and sometimes a personal note at the bottom.

What has all this got to do with Paul's letter to the Ephesians?

Paul spent almost three years in Ephesus and the surrounding region preaching the gospel and establishing new churches. Three years later, Paul found himself in prison in Rome thinking of his many friends in and around Ephesus. And so he writes them a letter. Actually, Ephesians is much more than a letter. It is a circular sermon that is meant to be copied and preached in all the churches in and around Ephesus. How do we know this? One of the striking things about Ephesians is that it lacks personal greetings and references that are common in other letters of Paul like Philippians. This was a letter not for one church, but a sermon for many churches. When you read it and through, and especially when you read it out loud you discover this is a letter to be preached.

As he languishes in prison, one of Paul's overarching concerns is for unity in and between the churches his ministry has helped establish. Last week as we read the first six verses of Ephesians chapter 4, we discovered that for Paul:

Unity is a God-given Gift
Unity is an Expression of Love
Unity is a God-Honoring Obsession

Today we are continuing with the next eleven verses of Ephesians 4. As we reflect on Paul's words we will discover that:

Unity is a Grace-Fuelled Commitment

Let's read from Ephesians 4, verse 7.

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

Every person who claims Christian faith is the recipient of God's amazing grace. Grace is translated from the Greek word, charis. The simplest definition of charis is the undeserved favor of God. Even though we did not deserve God's love, God poured his saving love into our lives so that we might be rescued from sin and death. This is amazing grace. But this is not what Paul is speaking specifically of here.

Here Paul is talking about the gifts that flow from God's grace – spiritual gifts. Paul is saying that to each one of us is given a gift of grace that is unique to each individual. Paul is reminding the Ephesians that within the unity of the church is remarkable diversity – diversity of personalities, ethnicities, temperaments and, according to God's grace, a diversity of gifts.

These gifts have been given as Christ apportioned it. In our day where 'being fair' is often an unhealthy obsession, this statement is somewhat contentious. Jesus apportions gifts. Some receive more, some receive less. Some receive a gift – say the gift of preaching – in large measure, some in smaller measure. Jesus illustrated this truth with the parable of the talents. In the story the master gave one servant five talents, another two and a third one talent. The point Jesus makes with the parable is not how many talents – how large or how many gifts a person receives – but what they do with that talent or gift.

Soon after we arrived on the Gold Coast I played golf with Verity Knight. Verity is the daughter of Russell, who was our Executive Minister at the time. Verity was then and still is now a phenomenal golfer who has played as a professional. Playing with Verity was a humbling experience. She hit the ball further, higher and straighter than me. She putted better than me. She scored far, far better than me. I muddle about the golf course. She cruises around it. And she is a girl! Honestly, playing with Verity there were times I thought I should just give up golf straight away.

Here's the truth. I don't care what gift God has blessed you with, there will always be someone more gifted than you. Here is my advice, get over it and get on with it.

Get over worrying about it and get on with serving. It doesn't matter how many gifts God gives you. It does matter what you do with them.

Let's move on:

This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) (Ephesians 4:8-10)

Triumphs were grand pageants in the Roman Empire. A triumph was awarded by the Roman Senate to a general or emperor who had achieved a great military victory in a distant land. There were strict rules governing triumphs. For example, at least 5000 enemy soldiers must have been killed and the victory must have been so comprehensive that the conquering army could return safely to Rome.

A triumph was a massive victory parade. The conquering army would bring with it the spoils of war – enemy prisoners and plunder. There would be trumpeters leading the procession through the streets of Rome and days of feasting to follow. The conquering general or emperor would distribute some of the spoils of war to the citizens of Rome as gifts. Monuments were often built following a triumph. This is Emperor Trajan's column built in around 110AD, 50 years after Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It memorializes Trajan's triumph over the Dacians. All over the column, which is 34 meters tall, are freezes depicting in graphic detail the military victory.

Quoting Psalm 68, Paul says of Jesus: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'

Paul is speaking of the triumph of Jesus and the gifts we receive from it.

Before returning triumphant a Roman general would have to risk his life by travelling to a distant land, leaving all the comforts of Rome.

Jesus left the security of heaven and descended to the lower, earthly regions. Jesus, the Creator of all things, clothed himself with human form.

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Before returning triumphant a Roman general would need to win a comprehensive victory over the enemies of Rome.

In his death, Jesus destroyed the dividing wall of hostility that separates us from God and from each other. In his death, Jesus defeated once and for all the power of sin for those who trust their life to him.

In his resurrection, Jesus defeated the last and greatest enemy of all – death itself. In his resurrection, Jesus defeated the power of the grave. Now he and we can taunt death; Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?

In returning triumphant a Roman general would carry home his captive enemies.

And so in his ascension, Jesus carries home captive sin, death, the grave, demonic principalities and powers and the devil himself.

Jesus destroyed, demolished, dismantled, dispatched, dissolved, disintegrated and devastated every enemy of life and love.

Jesus was and in and will always be triumphant. And because he is triumphant – because he is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, because every enemy is under his feet, because he has defeated, disarmed and dethroned every enemy power, because the keys of hell are his, because he Lord of all Creation – he ascended to heaven in the victory parade to end all victory parades and we his children share in his victory as we graciously receive the gifts that only a triumphant king can give.

The gifts we have we are received as gracious gifts of a triumphant king.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teacher to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

(Ephesians 4:11-13)

Paul now speaks about some of the diversity of graces or gifts that Jesus gives to the church. The five gifts listed are not an exhaustive list. In fact, together in Romans, 1 Corinthians and here in Ephesians Paul lists 20 separate gifts of the Spirit. I hold the view of many biblical scholars that even these 20 gifts are not an exhaustive list; that there are other gifts Paul does not list. The lists of gifts are important in what they highlight, but they are descriptive, not prescriptive. The most important thing is not the gifts themselves, but that God out of his gracious love gives them to us.

Let's turn to the five gifts Paul lists here:

An apostle - apostello- is a 'sent one'. The apostles were the historic eyewitnesses commissioned to testify to Jesus' resurrection. From a historical point of view, in our 21st century there are no apostles, but there are those who have apostolic ministries like those of Paul and Peter and the others – leadership, church planting and missionary work.

A prophet is a mouthpiece or spokesperson for God, a vehicle of God's direct revelation. A prophet does not add to God's Word, but with unusual insight and accuracy interprets and applies it.

An evangelist is particularly gifted to be effective in sharing the gospel with people outside the church – either one to one or with crowds. We are all, without exception, called to share the gospel – to do the work of evangelism. Some of us will be gifted more than others to do so effectively. On our staff team Ralph has this gift. God has used him in amazing ways to lead people to Christ.

The gifts of pastor and teacher are linked. A pastor is a shepherd of people and a good shepherd makes sure that their flock is well fed. People are nourished and fed as they are taught the word of God. Remember how Jesus saw the crowd on the

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shore of the Sea of Galilee and was moved in that they were like sheep without a shepherd? So Jesus fed them, not just with five loaves and two fish, but by teaching them until late in the day. He was their shepherd – their pastor and teacher.

The ultimate goal of these gifts and all spiritual gifts is that church to be built up in unity, knowledge, maturity and the very fullness of God. The ultimate goal of spiritual gifts is for the growth and maturity of the body of Christ – the church.

We live in a self-obsessed culture where the individual is elevated above all else. In such a culture it would be easy to view spiritual gifts through a selfish lens – that God gives us gifts for our own sense of fulfillment, importance and edification. God does not give spiritual gifts for individual self-actualization. Gifts are not given for to build up our sense of worth or meaning or to enhance our spiritual life – although we will benefit enormously as we exercise our God-given gifts. Paul reminds us that gifts, graces are given by God for the common good, the building up of the body which is the church and for the glory of God.

So if God has given you a gift and you're not using it, or you are neglecting it – ultimately it is not you who suffer, it is we the church who suffers.

It is important to note that all of the five gifts Paul lists relate to teaching in some way. An apostle is sent to testify to the truth of the resurrection. A prophet speaks and interprets the Word of God. An evangelist shares the Word of God. Pastors and teachers speak the word of God into hungry hearers.

This leads us further into Paul's insight:

**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.
(Ephesians 4:14)**

Jesus rebuked his disciples when they tried to stop children approaching him, saying that the kingdom of God belonged to such as these. And yet here is Paul offering a negative image of children, saying that the Ephesians will no longer be infants as they grow in the fullness of God. How do we reconcile this seeming contradiction? John Stott provides a helpful answer;

Christians are to resemble children in their innocence and humility, but not in their ignorance or instability.
(John Stott)

Healthy children grow up. Healthy children mature physically, emotionally and socially. And healthy children of God mature spiritually.

If we fail to mature then Paul warns us that will be:

Tossed back and forth by the waves.

If we fail to mature Paul warns us that we will be:

Blown here and there by every wind of teaching.

The word that is translated as blown here and there is the word, periphersomenoi. It means to spin or whirl around. Plato used it to refer to a child's spinning top.

Paul warns us that if we fail to mature, if we stay as spiritual babies, we will be deceived by:

The cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming.

Cunning and craftiness is translated from the word, *kybia*, which literally means dice playing. It was common in Paul's day for dice players to cheat with loaded die.

In summary, Paul is saying that if we fail to mature, if we stop growing in our faith we run the real risk of being swamped, confused and deceived.

Paul offers an alternative:

**Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.
(Ephesians 4:15)**

If we are to grow up spiritually, if we are to mature we will need to become lovers of the truth. We will seek the truth from each other and speak the truth to each other as an expression of love.

The sad truth is that we have become adept at avoiding, minimizing, running from, suppressing and ignoring the truth. We do this because we know that often hearing the truth can be incredibly painful. In the immortal words of Jack Nicholson, 'We can't handle the truth!' I don't want to be reminded of my brokenness, of my sin and rebellion. Running from the truth is deeply ingrained in us.

We run from the truth because the truth hurts, hearing the truth about ourselves can be incredibly painful. But only the truth can set us free!

John Ortberg offers us some really helpful analogies about the dangers of avoiding the truth:

Imagine picking your car up from the garage after a routine tune-up, and the mechanic says, "This car is in great shape. Clearly you have an automotive genius to take great care of your car." Later that day, your brakes don't work. You find out you were out of brake fluid. You could have died.

You go back to the garage, and you say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The mechanic replies, "Well, I didn't want you to feel bad. Plus, to be honest, I was afraid you might get upset with me. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say, "I didn't come here for a little fantasy-based ego boost! When it comes to my car, I want the truth."

Or imagine going to the doctor's office for a check-up. The doctor says to you, "You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympian. You are to be congratulated." Later that day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. You find out later your arteries were so clogged that you were, like, one doughnut away from the grim reaper.

You go back to the doctor and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The doctor says, "Well, I knew your body was in bad shape, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say to the doctor, "When it comes to my body, I want the truth!"

Obviously, when something matters to us, we do not want illusory comfort based on pain avoidance. We want truth.

Ortberg goes on to say:

Trying to grow spiritually without hearing the truth about yourself from somebody else is like trying to do brain surgery on yourself without a mirror.

(John Ortberg)

Paul says we grow up and mature as with our spiritual gifts we speak the truth in love to one another. The Greek phrase is literally translated as 'truthing in love.' Truth is not just something we lay hold of. Truth is something we do.

Truth and love are inextricably linked. There is no truth without love and there is no love without truth. In 1 Corinthians Paul tells us that love rejoices with the truth. John Stott puts it this way:

Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth...when love and truth are kept together, true community comes into being.'
(John Stott)

We will only grow and mature as we demonstrate 'truthing love' – as we speak truth to one another.

You cannot grow without truth spoken in love. We cannot grow as a church without a commitment to pursue truth and to speak truth in love to one another.

According to Facebook as of yesterday I have 654 friends. Actually, truth be told, most of those 654 are acquaintances more than they are friends.

We live in a culture of faux friendship. My mother is a great cook. I've told you before, she is a fantastic cake maker. She would make sponges filled with jam and whipped cream. Our family would devour them. Sometimes mum would bake a sponge and then find she had no cream in the fridge. So she would fill the sponge with a concoction called mock cream made from icing sugar. It looked like real cream – the same color and texture. But one bite into the sponge and you knew it was a pale imitation of the real thing.

We live in a culture of faux friendship; where what passes for friendship is a pale imitation of the real thing – where we know many people but are not known by many, if any people. Dallas Willard has said that superficiality is the curse of our age. And nothing is sadder than the superficial relationships we mistake for real friendships.

The ancient understanding of friendship was undergirded by the belief that friends are committed to the improvement of one another through moral advice and correction. Instead of this ideal, in our day we want friends that will make us feel good about ourselves, who will validate our feelings – who will keep life fun and friction-free.

I thank God that while I might have 654 acquaintances, I have dozens of friends. These are the people who speak the truth with love into my life. Many of these friends are in this church, on our elders and staff team, in my small group. These are the people that love me enough to, when I need to hear it, tell me the truth that may well hurt, but the truth that will set me free.

Charlie and Martha Shedd were wonderful writers and teachers on Christian marriage. They had a relationship where they were deeply open and honest, but always in a context of love. Charlie said the single most memorable letter he ever got from Martha was when they were in the middle of a big fight. She wrote, "Dear Charlie, I hate you. Love, Martha." That is speaking the truth in love.

Who speaks loving truth into your life? Do you have at least three people who can and will? If you don't, find them – invite them to. Get into a small group. Move past faux friendship into real, life-transforming friendship. Why taste mock cream when you can savor the real thing.

Paul reminds us that unity is a grace-filled commitment. It is fuelled by the gifts that our triumphant king gives us. As we minister to one another with these gifts we mature in the faith as we speak the truth in love to one another. In doing so, we soak ourselves in the word of God until we attain the whole measure of all the fullness of Christ.

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths,
From the laziness that is content with half-truths,
And from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of truth, deliver us.
(Henlee Barnette)