

## THE PRIORITY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH—Part 1

### **INTRODUCTION:**

I began last week's sermon with this question: How many of you want the year 2020 to be **exactly** like 2019? I was obviously not surprised that there were no "takers" because we all would like to see some changes (for the better, of course) in our circumstances...or family members...or finances...or health.

Too often times, though, we neglect the fact that God wants to change **us**. Just as it is good for us to have goals—if you aim at nothing, you will most certainly hit it—God has goals for us! What is God's goal for you? If you are **not** a child of God—if you are not born again—God's desire is that you become His child. How do I know that? II Peter 3:9 states that the Lord is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

God' goal is not for us to *just* be saved, however. If you are child of God, God's goal is for you to be more like Jesus in 2020 than you were in 2019. In other words, it is God's will for you to **grow** as a Christian. Last week we looked at the **process** of spiritual growth—how change can take place in our lives. We noted from Philippians 3:12 that it starts with a **dissatisfaction** of where we are at. Paul stated he had not already attained—he had not arrived—and if he hadn't, we obviously haven't either!

Simply being dissatisfied with where we are at does not in and of itself bring about change, however. There are **decisions** that need to be made because just having good intentions is not enough. We saw in Phil 3:13 Paul's focus—"this one thing I do"—and a forgetting of those things behind and a reaching forth unto the things which are before and a pressing on toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Although we talked about it some last week, this morning I felt led for us to really focus on the **priority** of spiritual growth. Maybe we are kinda/sorta tired of the same old/same old in our Christian life—but not motivated enough to do something about it. I obviously don't have the ability to make spiritual growth a priority in *your* life—but what I can do is show you the priority that **God** places on it.

Please turn to Ephesians 4:11-16. We have before us 4 reasons spiritual growth should be a priority in our lives. 1) It is the design of Christ's gifts to the church (11-12). 2) It is the desire of God for you as an individual (13). 3) Because of the dangers of remaining as children (14). 4) Because it develops growth within the body as a whole (15-16). Only going to be looking at the first one today.

Why should spiritual growth be a priority in **all of our lives**—not just a select few? Because of *The Design of Christ's gifts to the church (vss 11-12)*. Christ gave gifts to the church. Before we look at what the gifts were—and why He gave them—I want us to think about Christ as the giver.

### **1. The giver to the church is Christ (vss 7-11)**

Notice v 11 "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;" Who is the "He" in v 11? *Christ*. How do we know? Look at...

--verse 7 "gift of Christ"

--verse 8 Who ascended on high? Christ

--verse 9 speaks of the one who ascended—again a reference to Christ

--verse 10 speaks of the one who ascended up far above all heaven—yet another reference to Christ.

Back to verse 11 "And He—Christ—gave men—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers—" as gifts to the church. I want us to "park" here for a while and not hurry past this. Consider this—does anyone **love** the church—His people; not a building—more than Jesus Christ? No! How do we know? Because He gave up His **very life** for it!

**Acts 20:28** “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath **purchased with His own blood.**”

**Ephesians 1:7** “In whom we have redemption **through His blood**, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace;”

**Revelation 1:5** “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that **loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood,**”

Christ not only **loves** the church the most—He also knows the needs of the church better than anyone. After all, He is the All-knowing One and the creator and builder of the church so of course He knows best what it needs. He is also the One who owns everything so could give the church *anything*.

Here’s an illustration that I think will help us grasp this. Suppose a very wealthy man passes away and wills his estate to our church under **one condition**—we have to spend the money according to his written instructions! We have no idea what those instructions are until we get a call from the man’s lawyer saying the man had passed away. So the deacons and I meet with the lawyer to find out the amount of money we are getting—and the way we have to use it. Imagine our surprise when we find out he left us \$500,000—but we have to **build a water park** out back in our woods! It would almost be a “thanks-but-no-thanks” kind of situation—unless we could be very creative and put a new church building in the middle of the water park! *Wealth—but no wisdom—would not give us what we needed!*

Or what about this? What if the man—instead of being wealthy—was very wise? So he meets with us before he passes away to discuss how the money will be used after he passes away. We discuss a number of things and decide that a new **parking lot** would be a good thing to have. Please remember this is an illustration! I’m not saying that a parking lot is the next thing on the agenda. I certainly don’t want people upset that we aren’t fixing the bathrooms because they feel that that is more important than the parking lot!

Time goes on, the man passes away, and the lawyer asks when we can meet with him. Once again with great anticipation we meet the lawyer and are handed a check. The amount? A “whopping” \$500! Now don’t misunderstand me—I’m not saying that \$500 is a drop in the bucket! What I am saying is this: \$500 would not even cover the excavating required to get the parking lot ready to have asphalt laid down! Instead of it being a case of wealth without wisdom; this time it would be *wisdom without wealth*. In both cases, the church is not getting what it needs.

Christ doesn’t have those limitations, does He? Not only does He love the church the most—He knows the church the best! And not only does He love the church the most and know the church the best, no one but Christ has the ***inexhaustible and unending resources*** that He has. And what was **His gift** to His church?

## ***2. The gift to the church is spiritual leaders (v 11)***

Back to verse 11 “And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;” Christ’s gifts to the church was not a building...or land...or money—it was spiritually gifted men!

### A. Apostles. What is an **apostle**?

We actually have an answer to that question from the apostle Peter.

**Acts 1:21-22** “Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup> Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that He was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection.”

Is there anyone alive now who was alive when “the Lord Jesus went in and out among us”? *Obviously not!*

## B. Prophets. What is a **prophet**?

Although maybe this is too simplistic of an answer for some, a prophet is someone who is given new revelation from God—usually about the future—and shares it with people. Are there any prophets now providing us new revelation from God? I do not believe so. Why? Because we have the completed Word of God and don't need new revelation from God!

So why would Paul refer to two groups of men as gifts to the church when those gifts are no longer in existence today? Simple answer (at least in my mind): Paul wrote this when they **apostles and prophets were still** around! Ephesians was written in roughly 60 A.D. and the apostle John would still be around for another 30 years. If there were no prophets when Paul wrote this, then John wasn't a prophet. And if John wasn't a prophet, then we can't trust the book of Revelation as being divinely inspired by God!

Let's move on from Christ's *former* gifts to the church to His current ones—evangelists and pastors and teachers.

C. Evangelists. What is an evangelist? An evangelist is a preacher of God's Word whose focus is on people's need for salvation and revival. Many of you have sat under the preaching of an evangelist—or more than one—and probably have your favorite of the ones you've heard. Not all evangelists are—or were—pastors, but God's word says that Pastors should do the work of an evangelist. Notice Paul's words to Timothy in **II Timothy 4:5** "But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, **do the work of an evangelist**, make full proof of thy ministry."

## D. Pastors and Teachers.

In the Greek, the words are linked by one definite article—not two—so most scholars suggest that it is a single gift that is being referred to. In other words, Christ's gift to the church is a pastor-teacher. Others suggest that Christ does give the church teachers that may not necessarily be a pastor. Although you know—at least in part—what a pastor does, I'll elaborate more on that in a bit.

For now, consider this: Evangelists and pastors and teachers are Christ's gifts to the church. Pretty remarkable—and humbling—to think that the One who **loves** the church the most...and who **knows** the church the best...and who can give **anything** because He owns **everything**...gives the "gift" of a Pastor to the church. It makes me want to quit—and yet keep working harder than ever—both at the same time!

Christ gave evangelists and pastors and teachers as gifts to the church, but **why**? What was the purpose of Christ giving these men as gifts to the church? What is God's purpose for **me** in this church?

### **3. Christ's goal for giving spiritual leaders is to equip the saints (v 12)**

Verse 11 again... "And He [Christ] gave..." jump to v 12 "For the **perfecting** of saints"

#### A. "Perfect" means equip

My job—my responsibility—is to "perfect" you. What does that mean? Thankfully, it does **not** mean make you "sinless" because I obviously can't do that! Although our English word *perfect* is often translated from the Greek word "telios"—meaning "finished; lacking nothing for completeness; mature"—that is not what it means here. In fact, it is translated from a Greek word that is used only once in the Bible—right here. The idea is not to make someone sinless or even mature. Instead, it means to "equip, prepare, or train."

#### B. People to equip=saints

Who are pastors to equip, prepare, and train? The saints. Who are the saints?

--Not the football team that is playing the Vikings this afternoon and will probably win and travel to Green Bay next Sunday to hopefully lose against the Packers!

--And not the apostles...or people declared "saints" by a church!

--In Eph 1:1 we see Paul beginning this letter with the words, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the **saints** which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus"

“Saints,” then, are God’s children—those who are in the family of God because they have been born again. God gave pastors to churches for the purpose of equipping His children to do something. What am I to equip and prepare and train **you** to do? Why does God want you to be equipped? We know the answer, don’t we?

### C. Purpose to equip

Notice the middle of verse 12... “...for the work of the ministry” and “the edifying”—the building up—“of the body of Christ.” This may come as a shock to some of you, but my job is not to **grow the church**. My job is to grow **you**—to equip and train **you**—so you can do the work of the ministry! So what does that look like? Does it mean I am to train you all how to **preach**?

No; look at verse 7: “But unto **every one of us** is given grace according to the measure of the **gift of Christ**.” **I Corinthians 12:7, 11** “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to **every man** to profit withal. <sup>11</sup> But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to **every man severally** as He will.” Every one of us is gifted by God—and we are all gifted differently. **MacArthur wrote**: “I believe that every Christian is what I like to call a spiritual snowflake.” He didn’t say that because Christians are flakey...or frail...or melt in the heat! He said it because just as no two snowflakes are alike, no two Christians are alike. God has made us all different!

So again I ask, what does the work of the ministry look like? My deacon friend from Lake Mills used to fondly retell a story he heard from one of his teachers at Maranatha. The teacher, a former pastor, had just been called to a new church. After the Sunday evening service, the pastor left and there were still people at church. On Wednesday, one of the deacon’s said to the Pastor: “Our old pastor used to stay after the service and shut off all the lights. The new Pastor replied, ‘Yea; I talked to him about that but he doesn’t want to do it anymore!’”

Sometimes the work of the ministry is doing “highly visible” things like helping with VBS...or leading music...or playing piano...or preaching...or teaching. Other times the work of the ministry is doing things that are most noticed when they are **not** done, like cleaning the church...or mowing the lawn...or plowing the parking lot...or shutting out lights...or writing out checks! Still other times the work of the ministry involves things like counting the money...or folding bulletins...or decorating for holidays...or getting reports ready for business meetings.

There’s more to ministry than those things, isn’t there? There is calling one another if someone has been sick...or praying for one another...or offering a word of encouragement to someone...or writing letters to someone in prison like Mac writes to Ray.

Please don’t misunderstand me; I am not bringing these things up because I’m overwhelmed with what I have to do—or am disappointed with what you are doing or not doing. For a church our size, I am incredibly grateful for all the things that get done around here that I don’t do. In addition to the many things I just mentioned, my heart was blessed with the collective effort that went into the Christmas parade this year. From the ideas that were suggested...to the trailer that we were able to use...to the bags that were stuffed...to the good-sized group that turned out on a cold night to pass out candy and tracts, it was truly our church doing the work of the ministry together!

D. Problems in equipping. I’m sure there are more, but I want to bring up just two.

**i. Missing in action.** What do I mean by that?

Simply this—it is hard to equip you if you aren’t here!

**ii. Misunderstanding of the Pastor’s role**

Can the role of a pastor be misunderstood? It certainly can—not only by you, but also by *me*!

I am to equip—not entertain.

I am to feed and lead—not drive.

I am to teach God’s Word—not tickle your ears.

And sometimes I am to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort”—not my forte’—but something God requires me to do.

Why should spiritual growth be a priority in your life? Because Jesus Christ—the One who **loves** the church the most...and who **knows** the church the best...and who can give **anything** because He owns **everything**... gives the “gift” of a Pastor to the church. Why? To equip **you** for the work of the ministry.

Are you a participant—or a spectator?

***CONCLUDING THOUGHTS/QUESTIONS:***

1. What’s God’s will for you in 2020? First and foremost, if you are not saved, you need to be.
2. Child of God, how serious are you about **growing** as a Christian? Christ wants it to be a priority because of the gifts He gave to the church—spiritual leaders—and the goal He had in mind when He gave those leaders—equipping you for the work of the ministry. God has also gifted you as an individual—are you seeking to use and develop those gifts? If not, why not?