Ephesians

Lessons 7

**Lesson 6 Continued**

It is certainly possible for one person to have more than one of these role/gifts. Paul had the gifts of apostle and evangelist and probably prophecy as well. It also important to distinguish offices from function. For example, a church might have only one person serving in the office of “pastor,” but any number of people in the congregation could be gifted at the function of discipling and caring for other believers. This distinction is also important when thinking about gender roles. Those who believe that the NT reserves certain offices (elder, senior pastor) for males typically acknowledge that women can and do have any of these gifts, including leadership, pastoring, etc., and that there are numerous settings or outlets where they can exercise those gifts even if a couple of offices are reserved for males.

Comparing the gift lists in the NT shows Paul did not try to list every spiritual gift in any particular gift list:

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| Eph. 4:11-12 | Rom. 12:4-8 | 1 Cor. 12: |
| Apostles | Prophesying | Apostles |
| Prophets | Serving | Prophets |
| Evangelists | Teaching | Teachers |
| Pastors | Encouraging | Miracles/Healing |
| Teachers | Helping others | Helping others |
|  | Leading | Administration |
|  | Showing mercy | Speaking in tongues |

The contexts for the lists have subtle differences. Ephesians emphasizes the purpose of the most visible spiritual gifts—so that all believers can achieve maturity in Christ, not for the aggrandizement of individual believers having those gifts. Romans emphasizes that each believer should enthusiastically exercise their particular gift. 1 Corinthians emphasizes the relationship between gifts, especially the visible, spectacular gifts, and the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Paul probably just listed some important examples relevant to the context of each epistle rather than trying to set forth a comprehensive list of gifts, which would likely be an impossible task, as the lists indicate that any function genuinely beneficial to other believers can be a gift.

“for the preparation of the saints for the work of the ministry for the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature person, to the measure of Christ’s full stature.” Paul unleashes a string of prepositional phrases elaborating on the purpose of the spiritual gifts. They were given to prepare or equip the saints/believers for the work of service or ministry. The word for service or ministry is a form of deacon. This has the further purpose of building up the body of Christ, recalling Paul’s descriptions of the church as a living temple and a body. The idea is that the most visible gifts, the ones we associate with leadership, are for the purpose of equipping other believers, so that all believers can serve/minister productively, benefitting the entire community. The participation of all believers in ministry is needed because the goal is for all believers to reach (1) unity of faith, (2) unity in the knowledge of the Son of God, (3) to become a mature or fully grown body of believers (4) attaining to the measure of Christ’s full stature. It is a corporate goal/purpose, and the measuring stick is everyone in the community reflecting Christ’s character.

“in order that we might no longer be children, being tossed back and forth by the wavs and carried about by every wind of doctrine by the cunningness of people by deceitfulness toward the scheme of error.” This mission of corporate maturity is urgent; if believers are children, i.e., less than full-grown, they can be “tossed back and forth” or “carried off by wind.” Both phrases convey being subject to outside forces rather than choosing one’s own course. The force is “teaching” or “doctrine.” Again, Paul probably is thinking of academic teaching but rather the ideas about life and what to do in life. Paul strings together more prepositional phrases to describe this bad teaching/doctrine: “by the cunningness of people,” “by deceitfulness” “toward the scheme of error or going astray.” The forces of the world do not ignore believers and leave them to mature in peace. They will try to deceive believers with false ideas in order to knock them off course. Spiritually immature believers are vulnerable.

“but rather being truthful with love, we might grow up to him with reference to all things, who is the head, the Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together through every supporting connection according to the working in measure from each individual part, causes the growth of the body to building itself up in love.” Instead, Paul wants believers to take a different path, “being truthful with other-centered love.” This implies that the world’s ideas are false and ultimately selfish and harmful to believers, whereas Christian teaching should be true and taught with love, i.e., for others’ genuine spiritual benefit. As Paul taught in 1 Corinthians, spiritual gifts should be exercised in love for others’ benefit. For ex., it is not enough to be a gifted leader; a believer must learn to exercise that gift in truth and with love for those being lead. The goal is that believers would collectively “grow up to Christ with reference to all things,” i.e., all areas of spiritual life. A believer cannot say, well, I am good at knowledge, so I don’t have to do anything for anyone else. Nor can a believer say, I am good at leadership, so I don’t need to worry about mercy. Christ embodied all of God’s moral excellence, and we should aim to follow his example. Paul returns to the body metaphor, re-affirming that Christ is the head, the pre-eminent leader of this community/body. Paul continues to mix construction images with the body metaphor by saying that this body is fitted together and held together from Christ. Christ holds the body together “in contact with the other parts by means of every supporting connection.” Christ does this according to the working in measure provided by each individual part. This phrase conveys that, in some mysterious way, Christ holds the community together through the individual contributions of each believer, which should align with the measure of the spiritual gift provided to that believer. This utilization of gifts provided by Christ and fitted together by Christ causes the body to grow or mature, building itself up “in love.” The repetition of love—a genuine concern for others manifesting itself in concrete behaviors like patience, kindness, not being envious, not boasting, humility, politeness, not self-seeking, not being easily angered, keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting with evil, rejoicing with truth, protecting others, trusting, hopeful, and persevering. 1 Cor. 13:4-8.

**Applying Spiritual Gifts**

All believers have a responsibility to grow in the qualities/virtues displayed by Christ, including all the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, Gal. 5:22-23) and manifestations of love (patience, kindness, not being envious, not boasting, humility, politeness, not self-seeking, not being easily angered, keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting with evil, rejoicing with truth, protecting others, trusting, hopeful, and persevering, 1 Cor. 13:4-8).

All believers have a responsibility to develop and use their Christ-given spiritual gift to benefit other believers. How does one identify spiritual gifts? Here are some random thoughts:

--Trying/doing things is a better guide than guessing or taking tests

--Serving in your giftedness will involve work but it should provide a sense of satisfaction that keeps it from feeling like drudgery or pure misery

--Serving in your giftedness should have a positive spiritual effect on other people; this does not mean you will always get positive feedback or always feel a warm fuzzy glow; Paul had his share of rejection and set backs; but you should, over time, be seeing some positive effect or feedback;

--natural talents and skills are different than spiritual gifts; but spiritual gifts often align with natural talents or interests, so it makes sense to try ministries that emphasize some talent or interest and see what happens;

Another important application of the principle that believers have different gifts is the importance of using teams. For example, it is important for every believer to develop the virtue of mercy. But people who have that spiritual gift tend to view decisions through the lens of mercy in a way that others either don’t see or don’t see as quickly. Jesus had 12 disciples. When discontent arose in the early church concerning food distribution (their benevolence fund), the 12 apostles appointed a team of 7 men to address the problem. (Acts 6:3-6.) The NT generally portrays Paul and his associates as appointing groups of elders to lead local congregations. Our church has an elder board, and uses teams such as nominating committees to help pick elders, and search committees to hire full-time pastoral staff. This helps ensure the involvement of more types of spiritual gifts as well as diverse viewpoints/experience.

**Eph. 4:17-24 Walking in holiness part 1: leaving behind past futile secular habits.**

“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk just as also the gentiles walk in the futility of their minds, their reasoning process being darkened, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts.” The conjunctions link all the way back to Paul’s exhortation for the Ephesians to walk/live worthy of their calling from/by God. Paul declares that he speaks as a witness for the Lord (here meaning Christ) or under Christ’s authority.

The exhortation is that they “no longer walk/live” as the gentiles do. This acknowledges that many in the Ephesian church once lived a Greco-Roman lifestyle. Paul employs multiple negative descriptions of that lifestyle. The first phrase is “in the futility of their minds.” The word translated “futility” means empty, unproductive, a dead end. “mind” means disposition or attitude, especially toward choices with moral or ethical implications. The second phrase is “their reasoning processes being darkened.” Most commentators think this phrase helps explains why the typical Greco-Roman moral disposition was futile—because their reasoning was “darkened.” This is a figurative way of saying their view was short-sighted or confused, like someone stumbling around an unfamiliar dark room.

This futile, darkened Greco-Roman disposition left such a person “alienated from the life of God.” Paul earlier described unbelievers as spiritually dead. Eph. 2:1. He similarly describes them as strangers to the life that comes from God. He describes the cause of their alienation as “ignorance”; they do not appreciate their alienation or what they are missing. This is “due to the hardness of their hearts.” Their hearts have become desensitized or resistant to information about God, so that they do not appreciate their alienation from the life God could offer, and, because their understanding of reality is inaccurate, it is no surprise that their thoughts are darkened and their moral disposition is futile or empty.

“who, having become callous, have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.” “callous” means insensitive, in this context, to God’s view of their choices as well as the spiritual life God offers. In their callous state, the typical Greco-Roman hands himself over to “indecency,” which is following one’s desires without regard to any constraints such as social customs, laws, or morals. “seeking out” or “practicing” “all types of impurity with greediness.” “greediness” conveys the absence of moderation and the presence of selfishness. Being spiritually callous leads to the pursuit of all types of impurity without regard to moderation, social constraints, or the negative effects on others. In short, the typical Greco-Roman unbeliever was addicted to sin and acted accordingly.

There is evidence that first-century Greco-Roman did not completely lack self-awareness. There is a famous epitaph on a first-century Roman tombstone that includes the line: “baths, wine, and sex ruin our bodies, but what makes live worth living except baths, wine, and sex?” Supposedly variations of this idea were common in the first-century Roman empire. For example an inscription in a mosaic reads: “Hunting, Bathing, Playing/Gambling, Laughing—That’s Living.” In the second half of the first century, Tacitus wrote: “But, little by little, our traditional moral values weakened and then were completely subverted by an imported licentiousness, so that we began to see here in our city everything that could corrupt or be corrupted: our young men were ruined by their eagerness for foreign ways, their enthusiasm for gymnasia, for idleness, for perverted sex, and all with the approval of the emperor and the Senate.” Having some awareness of the problem, however, is not the same as having a solution to the problem.

“But you have not so learned Christ, inasmuch as you heard about him and were taught in him, as there is truth in Jesus.” Paul asserts that Christianity differs sharply from this secular Greco-Roman lifestyle. Paul uses the phrase “learn Christ,” which is awkward in English but means that the Ephesians have gotten to know Christ, by hearing about him and being taught about him, and thus they should know that Christ has different expectations and that his expectations are true, that is they are based on an accurate understanding of reality.

“that you have laid aside the old person according to the former lifestyle who is being corrupted in accordance with the desires coming from deceit” Paul reminds the Ephesians about what they had been taught; i.e., as believers, they had put off or laid aside “the old person” and their corresponding “former lifestyle” which was being corrupted, meaning on a path to destruction, because the old person is controlled by desires based on deceit.

“but you are being renewed by the spirit in your mind and that you have put on the new person who has been created after God’s likeness in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth” In addition to putting off the old person, the Ephesians’ minds are undergoing a process of being made new or renewed by the Holy Spirit. Paul also taught not only had put off the old person, when they came to faith, they put on a new spiritual person. The new spiritual person was created by God after God’s likeness, or in God’s image, which is characterized by righteousness, holiness, and originates from truth (an accurate view of reality).

**Eph. 4:25-32 Walking in holiness part 2: Five important practices, stated positively and negatively, with a rationale**

After making the general exhortation to put off the futile secular Greco-Roman attitude and to put on the new person created in God’s likeness, Paul provides five concrete examples of putting on a new person. Each example is stated negatively and positively and a rationale is given.

“Therefore, having laid aside falsehood, each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, because we are members of one another.” The first principle is truthfulness. “having laid aside falsehood” The Ephesians laid aside falsehood at conversion when they acknowledged the truth of their own sinfulness and chose to rely on Jesus Christ to make them righteous before God. Paul’s exhortation shows that discovering and laying aside lies and inaccurate beliefs we have about ourselves is an ongoing process in believers’ lives, like peeling an onion. “each one of you speak truth with his neighbor” This is a quotation from Zech. 8:16. The context of Zech. 8:16 is the return from captivity and the Lord’s promise that He intends to do good for the remnant. Both the OT and NT teach that communities cannot accomplish good things in the absence of truth. A commitment to telling and facing truth requires people to trust each other, which is probably why, in Zech., the Lord assured the remnant that He intended to do good for them. “because we are members of one another” Paul’s rationale for truthfulness among NT Christians goes back to the word picture of the church as Christ’s body and that each person is a member or cell of the same body. As Chrysostom said: If the eye saw a serpent, would it lie to the foot? If the nose smells poison, would it lie to the mouth? If church members all recognize that we are parts of the same body and thus the suffering and joy of one individual affects all the other members, then we should be able to cultivate the trust required to be truthful with each other. I.e., I know that what others say to me is intended for my benefit, even if it’s something I didn’t want to hear, and vice-versa.

“Be angry and do not sin; let not the sun go down on your irritation, nor do you give opportunity to the devil.” The second principle is godly management of anger. Paul quotes Psalm 4:4—be angry and do not sin. Psalm 4 was written by David, likely written during one of the phases when he was being slandered and his life was threatened. The line is an exhortation to his enemies to repent of their anger, stop slandering David, and get right with the Lord. Paul seems to be acknowledging that believers will get angry, but exhorting them not to let anger cause them to sin. “let not the sun go down on your irritation” This may have been a Greek proverb, and the time period should not be taken too literally. It is an exhortation to not harbor anger or to not allow anger to fester in one’s heart. It implies that one form of sin related to anger is allowing anger to fester, for example, nursing a grudge, like Haman’s feelings toward Mordecai in the book of Esther. “nor do you give opportunity to the devil” The rationale for godly management of anger, including not allowing it to fester, is to avoid making oneself vulnerable to the devil. Experience and scripture indicate that humans do not make good decisions while angry. (James 1:20.) Anger makes us vulnerable to the fleshly desires and evil spiritual influences, as happened to Saul when he became angry and jealous toward David. Psalm 4 and many other Psalms show that one godly method of addressing anger is pouring out one’s feelings to God in prayer.

“Let the stealer no longer steal, but rather let him labor working with his own hands that which is good, in order that he might share with the one who has need.” Paul exhorts anyone still practicing theft to stop stealing. Commentators’ best guess is that Paul is referring to unemployed people who resorted to theft to meet their needs. The Roman Empire had a large number of slaves. Because their masters were responsible for providing them with food, clothing, and housing, the first layer of jobs would have gone to slaves. Former slaves (“freedmen”) and non-wealthy citizens who did not own a business would have competed for any work that could not be done by slaves. This type of work tended to be temporary and cyclical:

In general, the life of the lower-class urban worker was harsh. Wages were low, prices were high, and jobs were only temporary. Free workers had no job security, no retirement benefits, no medical plans, and no unemployment insurance. Indeed, free workers led harsher lives than some slaves, who were fed, clothed, and given medical care by their masters.

As the Romans Did at 132. One can understand the temptation during times of unemployment to resort to theft, but any victim was likely to be needy himself. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to seek out legitimate work, even if meant exhausting manual labor—which upper classes viewed with disdain and requires more effort than theft—and to be prepared to share when other believers experienced real need. This indicates Paul expected churches to function as a social safety net by working whenever individual believers could work so that the community could provide for those who could not work for whatever reasons. (Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:8-15.) It is much closer to socialism than the rugged individualism popular in America.

“Let no unwholesome word come out of your mouths, but whatever is beneficial for the building up of that which is lacking, in order that it might give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Paul exhorts the Ephesian not to speak any unwholesome or useless word. “Unwholesome” in this context means not fit for consumption or rotten. Instead, believers should speak words that are good or beneficial for helping others grow spiritually (i.e., build up areas that are lacking). The purpose or rationale is so that our words may be a means of grace used by the Holy Spirit to help other church members grow. Paul add another contrast: do not grieve the Holy Spirit, implying that the Holy Spirit is grieved when our words are unwholesome or unproductive, rather than something the Holy Spirit can use as a means of grace.

“Let every kind of bitterness and anger and wrath and shouting and abusive speech together with every kind of malice be put away from you. But become kind to one another, compassionate, being gracious to one another, just as also God in Christ was gracious to us.” Paul exhorts the Ephesians to put away every form of (1) bitterness (resentment), (2) anger and wrath, (3) shouting and abusive speech, and (4) malice (an all-inclusive word for badness or ill will). Commentators suggest that malice is meant to color or modify the first three categories, i.e., Paul is telling them to put away malicious bitterness, malicious anger, malicious shouting and abusive speech. This does not mean there is a category of non-malicious abusive speech that would be good; rather Paul is highlighting and condemning the ill-will or malice toward another human being(s) involved in bitterness or abusive speech. Instead, they should become good in the sense of kind toward others, compassionate, and extending grace toward others (here emphasizing unmerited favor). “just as also God in Christ was gracious to us.” The rational/motive is the incredible grace God the Father has provided to believers through Jesus Christ, which was extended to us when we were thoroughly underserving—dead in trespasses and sins. This rationale indicates the common thread is how to react when other people are offensive or wrong us. The old man reacts to such offenses by focusing on our own injury and becoming bitter or taking the offensive in self-righteous anger or even fighting-fire-with-fire by unleashing abusive speech. The new person, however, should extend grace to an offender by focusing on the offender’s poor state and reacting with kindness, compassion, and mercy.

Five New Person/Church Life Principles:

1. Practice truth-telling/listening
2. Godly anger management—do not harbor anger against each other
3. Work hard and help those in need
4. Speak words that spiritually benefit others
5. Respond to offenses with kindness and grace

Note how 1 & 4 both require us to work on our speech, and 2 & 5 both require us to work on our emotional responses to things that provoke anger. This underscores the importance of healthy speech and reactions to wrongdoing are to maintaining healthy Christian community. The principle of working hard so that we can share with those in need shows that our faith is meant to impact our daily lives in very practical ways.