

I.N.I.

Ascension Service
May 25, 2017
Ephesians 4:7-16

In Christ Jesus, who is the Head of the Church, His body, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

This past Tuesday Jonathan had a test on the Second Article. Two of the questions were “what is Jesus’ humiliation and what is His exaltation. He will finish the test this Tuesday so I will find out whether he got those questions right.

Jesus’ humiliation is when He did not use His godly powers fully---He was conceived, born, suffered, crucified, died and was buried. His exaltation is when He again used His godly powers fully—He descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, sits at God’s right hand and shall come to judge the living and the dead. Whereas most Christians fully understand Jesus’ steps of humiliation, there is considerable misunderstanding over some of the steps of Christ’s exaltation.

First of all many in the world don’t even know Jesus did some of these steps of exaltation for they are not world-wide celebrations like Christmas and Good Friday or even Easter. Many, even some Christians, believe Jesus descended into hell to suffer. He did not! He descended into hell to proclaim His victory over sin, death and the devil. Also Christians are of various opinions as to why and what Jesus’ Ascension into heaven and His sitting at God’s right hand means. Some believe He ascended because He needed to go to one place, in some corner in heaven, literally at the Father’s right hand in His heavenly Kingdom.

But God has no right or left hand. Jesus’ Ascension was more of a victory parade to show to the whole world who the Conqueror, the Ruler of everything is. It is Jesus! Jesus’ sitting at God’s right hand means He rules all things and since He is omnipresent He also is everywhere in His rule and protection of His Church. Jesus’ ascension shows that He had successfully finished the work for which He had been sent to do. He now could return to the glory which He had with the Father before He came to this earth to assume the role of the Suffering Servant. And one day He will come back as Judge, and take all of His believers to be with Him in heavenly glory forever.

Our text this evening answers one aspect to this question:

WHY DID JESUS ASCEND?

I: To give GIFTS to His Church.

Paul writes in our first verse: **BUT TO EACH ONE OF US GRACE WAS GIVEN ACCORDING TO THE MEASURE OF CHRIST'S GIFT.** Each one of us has received a “gift of grace” from Christ. The first and greatest gift of grace was the gift of forgiveness of sins. Did we need this gift? Need we even ask? We ALL were conceived and born in sin. Because of sin we ALL were Satan’s captives, headed for a future dungeon in hell. We ALL have a heart filled with sin that shows itself in our sinful words and actions toward each other and which we privately know in our sinful thoughts. Because of sin we ALL deserved God’s condemnation and an eternal separation from Him.

But Jesus has earned for ALL of us forgiveness for ALL of our sins. He has washed our hearts clean, set us free from Satan’s captivity, made us one with our Heavenly Father and future participants of paradise above.

We can be sure of this because of another great gift of grace we have been given---the gift of faith. Having been made members of Jesus’ body through faith in Him, is solely by God’s grace, not by any merit or worthiness on our part. Jesus did the work of redeeming us by His perfect life, atoning sacrifice and resurrection from the dead and then He sent the Holy Spirit who did the work of converting and sanctifying us by means of the Gospel.

We are told in our text that it is Christ who determines which gifts a believer is to receive. They are given **ACCORDING TO THE MEASURE OF CHRIST'S GIFT.** No one is overlooked. This grace in Christ is given to each of us. That is so very important for us to realize. Every ability and every talent you have, has been given to you as a gift, not earned by you. We may hone our talents,

work at our abilities, but the possessing of them was Christ's gift to us. That realization eliminates all pride or boasting on our part. It should keep us from becoming conceited about our abilities and keep us from looking down upon others whose abilities do not match our own. It should also teach us not to murmur and complain because we think our abilities or talents are inferior to others.

Paul tells us that when Christ ascended on high, He led captivity captive. That is, He took Satan, who had captured and made captive all of mankind and made him captive. Jesus foretold this in John 12:31 **"NOW IS THE JUDGMENT OF THIS WORLD; NOW THE RULER OF THIS WORLD WILL BE CAST OUT."** In Colossians 2:15 Paul writes, **HAVING DISARMED PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS, HE MADE A PUBLIC SPECTACLE OF THEM, TRIUMPHING OVER THEM BY THE CROSS.** Jesus lives, the victory's won!

The gifts that Christ has given to His Church that Paul mentions in our text are the gifts of **APOSTLES, PROPHETS, EVANGELISTS, PASTORS AND TEACHERS.**

The Ascended Savior never gave gifts just for the sake of giving. They were and are always given for a purpose. And that is our second point this evening. Jesus ascended:

II: To Strengthen His Body.

Paul writes in I Cor. 12: **THERE ARE DIVERSITIES OF GIFTS, BUT THE SAME SPIRIT. THERE ARE DIFFERENCES OF MINISTRIES, BUT THE SAME LORD. AND THERE ARE DIVERSITIES OF ACTIVITIES, BUT IT IS THE SAME GOD WHO WORKS ALL IN ALL. BUT THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT IS GIVEN TO EACH ONE FOR THE PROFIT OF ALL:**

In our text Paul is speaking of the gift of church leaders. They have been given as gifts to the Church, not so they can obtain honor, power, prestige and glory for themselves, but in order to serve others. They are to serve the members by training them, teaching them, preparing them for the work of ministry, for service to others as well. What a grand plan of our Lord. In doing this the body of Christ is built up.

God's plan is perfect. The pastors and teachers train the members and together they serve one another and those outside. Each believer will function in keeping with the measure of grace Christ has given him. This speaks to the individual. To each of you. To every single one of you. Members who have learned Scriptural principles and truths from their spiritual leaders will be alert and watchful for opportunities to serve and utilize their talents.

So how does the Lord build up and strengthen His body? By the Means of Grace. The Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Paul mentions a three-fold purpose or goal here:

- 1) That we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.
- 2) That we come to a perfect person.
- 3) That we all come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

That is why we have Bible Study. That is why we emphasize doctrine. So that we have a full knowledge of and agreement upon the truths of the Christian faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. This takes time and effort. Time spent in the Word. Jesus said **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES, FOR IN THEM YOU THINK YOU HAVE ETERNAL LIFE; AND THESE ARE THEY WHICH TESTIFY OF ME.**

The second goal is to come to a perfect person—literally this means a complete person, one who has reached the goal. We need to hear, study and read the Word of God until our dying day. Until that goal is reached we still have much work to do.

The third goal is to come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. This means spiritual maturity. And what is Christian, spiritual maturity?

In the next verse Paul tells us first what it is not. We read: **THAT WE SHOULD NO LONGER BE CHILDREN, TOSSED TO AND FRO AND CARRIED ABOUT WITH EVERY WIND OF DOCTRINE, BY THE TRICKERY OF MEN, IN THE CUNNING CRAFTINESS OF DECEITFUL PLOTTING.** Paul heaps up one term after another to describe the characteristics of those who are spiritually childlike or immature. They are like waves tossed about by the wind, like boats buffeted back and forth by the shifting wind. One teaching comes and that sounds good. Another teaching comes and that too sounds good. It is what we see today with all of the liberal

thinking and historical critical analysis that is accepted by so many church bodies. The common belief that no one has the truth, that every church and every religion has some good things to say and teach and we should accept all beliefs is Satan's deception of the modern age.

Paul says that is like a dishonest man who plays with loaded dice cheating his opponent, so that these false teachers make others believe that what they say and teach is the honest truth from God when it is not.

Paul says they know all the tricks. Their aim is to employ schemes to practice deception. They lay out a path of logic and sophistry that appears so good and true but it leads away from the truth and is full of lies. It is easy for the false teacher to deceive those who are like children spiritually. Therefore we need to serve one another by helping each other to become spiritually mature in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

Paul now tells us what Christian spiritual maturity is. It is **SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE, GROWING UP IN ALL THINGS INTO HIM WHO IS THE HEAD -- CHRIST --**

This is how we help one another grow toward spiritual maturity and strengthen Christ's body—we tell one another the truth of God's Word. But we do it in love! In doing this we grow up into Christ who is the Head. It is by growing up into the Head, which is Christ, that the believer comes to spiritual maturity.

Paul continues with this picture of the body. Verse 16 **FROM WHOM THE WHOLE BODY, JOINED AND KNIT TOGETHER BY WHAT EVERY JOINT SUPPLIES, ACCORDING TO THE EFFECTIVE WORKING BY WHICH EVERY PART DOES ITS SHARE, CAUSES GROWTH OF THE BODY FOR THE EDIFYING OF ITSELF IN LOVE.**

Just look at your bodies. You and I are composed of so many different parts: muscles, bones, organs, glands, nerves, skin, hair, blood, etc. We have veins and arteries, tendons and tissue, eyes and ears and they all work together with each other taking orders from the brain. Only an all knowing, all powerful God could have designed such a marvelous body where everything works in concert with each other. So also only an all knowing, all powerful God could have designed such a marvelous spiritual body of believers where everything works in concert with each other as we each do our share in proclaiming the Gospel message of peace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus and show loving concern for each other taking our orders from the Head--Jesus.

We know that when something breaks down in our bodies, when there is a blockage in the system, or a disease is cruising through our bodies, or a stroke occurs so that parts do not work, the body does not function very well and sometimes even fights against itself. The same can happen to the body of Christ—the believers. It can become sick or diseased with false teaching. There can be a blockage or breakdown because of apathy or spiritual laziness. Infighting can take place because of personality conflicts or egos needing stroking. Applying the Word in love is the only antidote and serum that can keep the body healthy and strong.

In conclusion we see how important unity of doctrine is for preserving the oneness the Spirit has worked in the Church. Teaching the Word and spreading the Word to others, building up the body of Christ is our top priority.

That again is one of the reasons our Savior Ascended---

TO GIVE GIFTS TO HIS CHURCH TO STRENGTHEN HIS BODY.

What a beautiful picture the Lord through Paul draws for us here—a body united, concerned, and growing—Christ's body: His Church of all believers. To be brought into this body and then be permitted to do our part in helping this body grow is profound evidence of our Lord's amazing grace and that should humbly move all of us to declare: "Lord, here am I, use me!"

Amen.