

To fear, or not to fear the Lord?

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[0 : 00] The reading is taken from Ephesians chapter 4, which can be found on page 1176. I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, when he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.

In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

[2 : 03] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Estee, thanks very much for reading for us. Happy New Year, everyone. Nice to see us all back at the start of a new year. We are continuing our series of talks in Ephesians, from where we left off at the end of last year, so do please keep Ephesians chapter 4 open.

And you'll see that at the heart of today's passage is the issue of church growth. Church growth. It's there in verse 12, Ephesians 4 verse 12, for building up the body of Christ.

It's there in verse 15. We are to grow up in every way. And verse 16 makes the whole body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Now, I want to suggest this couldn't be more relevant to us at the start of a new year. After all, New Year's resolutions are all about the kind of person that I want to be.

[3 : 25] Fitter, thinner, less frivolous with money, more focused. None of those things, my resolutions, of course, but they may be for others. But far more important than what kind of person do I want to be, what kind of church do we want to be in 2019?

Because if we take the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians seriously, then Grace Church Dulwich is going to move in one of either two directions in the next 12 months.

Remember why the letter is written. It's written so the Christians in Ephesus don't lose heart. Chapter 3 verse 13. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I'm suffering for you, which is your glory.

The opposite of losing heart, of course, is standing firm. That is where the letter finishes. Over the page, chapter 6 verse 10.

Finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. And verse 13. Having done all this to stand firm. Can you see the choice that Grace Church Dulwich faces, that we face in 2019?

[4 : 35] It is the choice that every other genuine local church faces in every year. Are we going to lose heart? Or are we going to stand firm and remain strong?

If we're going to be strong, we need to be growing. And wonderfully, the risen Lord Jesus has not left it up to us or to bring in the management consultants or the church growth experts to work out how we should be growing this year.

Rather, in these verses, Ephesians 4 verses 7 to 16, the risen Jesus himself gives us his blueprint, his strategy for growth.

Now, you'll see I put an outline of where we're going this morning on the back of the service sheet. First of all, the significance of the strategy, verses 7 and 8.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, it says, quoting Psalm 68, when he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.

[5 : 53] Now, we'll come to the strategy itself in the second point. But what we see here is that it is the strategy of the risen, victorious, conquering Lord Jesus.

Psalm 68, there in verse 8, part of it quoted, it's a psalm of overwhelming conquest. As God rescues his people from Egypt, as he leads them through the desert, as he defeats his enemies, as he establishes his rule in Jerusalem for his people, as his program of salvation is rolled out to his people, as his people rejoice in his victory, as they rejoice in his power.

I think, as John reminded us earlier, of the victory parade after a major sporting event. Perhaps the Olympic team paraded through the streets on an open-top bus, everyone rejoicing in their achievements, or a city football team returning in triumph to their home city.

I guess in first century Ephesus, verse 18, might have brought to mind a Roman general having secured a great military victory, riding into Rome in triumph with his army, and then behind them a host of captives being led, and distributing bounty, and sharing the benefits of his conquest with his people.

Well, just as the psalm reminds us that God has delivered his people in the past, so, of course, he has done so supremely in Jesus Christ to secure a far greater victory, a victory over sin and death before ascending once again to heaven.

[7 : 47] Verses 9 and 10, Jesus Christ is the one who descended, ascended, it's what we have been celebrating, of course, over Christmas, and he has now ascended, verse 10, far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

In other words, that the mighty rule of Jesus might fill the universe. If you're here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, it is a reminder, isn't it, of the need to move beyond Christmas.

A baby is small, and safe, and containable, but Jesus Christ did not stay a baby.

He died on the cross so we can be reconciled to God, so we can be at peace with him. He rose from the dead, never to die again. He then ascended back to heaven, where he sits in power at God's right hand.

Imagine for a moment the Channel 4 interview with Jesus after his ascension. So, Jesus, you're now seated at God's right hand in power.

- [9 : 01] What is the plan now? Well, this is just the beginning. My plan for the whole fullness of time is a whole new creation under my rule.
- interviewer. How are you going to do it? It's a massive task. I'm going to do it through the church because the church is my instrument for carrying out my purposes in the world.
- Interviewer again. But how will they do it? Answer, I'll give them the gifts. I'll equip them such that they do grow.
- the significance of the strategy. I take it it shows why each one of us should be committed to church growth.
- Perhaps the temptation for some is to think something like this. Yes, I'd like to see Grace Church growing. I'd like to be, I'd like to attend a church which is growing and healthy.
- [10 : 03] And I really hope the staff team and the church council are able to pull it off. In other words, the business of church growth is the responsibility of other people.
- And especially, I guess, in first century Ephesus as in 21st century London when the church looks small, when the church looks unimpressive, where the world looks big and impressive and attractive and there are so many other things which we could commit ourselves to in 2019.
- You know, our job or career or building projects or whatever it is for you that you've set yourself, your eyes on in 2019. Or perhaps for some of us actually, rather than 2019 being a year when we decided to do more, actually, perhaps for some of us, 2019 is a year when we said to us, do you know what?
- I'm going to do less this year. And we leave the issue of growing the church to others. Yes, happy to come along, happy to be on a rotor even, but the place where I'm really going to invest myself and use my energy is elsewhere.
- Well, to think like that, can we see shows that actually we have too small a view of Jesus, a too small a view of the risen Jesus and his strategy for his church and his world.
- [11 : 36] But of course, as well as being a rebuke to some, this should also, I take it, be a terrific encouragement for others who are committed to church growth, committed to it because Jesus is Lord.
- And therefore, we cannot underestimate the significance and we don't underestimate the significance of the local church, neither Grace Church or indeed the church worldwide because we understand that actually the local church is a signpost to the future day when everyone will have to bow the knee to Jesus and recognize his rule.
- That's the significance of the strategy. Let's then move on and think about the strategy itself and understanding the strategy and look, will you please, at verses 11 and 12.
- Verses 11 and 12. And he, that's the risen Jesus, and he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.
- Notice Jesus' strategy for church growth involves each of us using the gifts that we have been given. And I want us to focus on these verses, verses 11 and 12, because they focus on two categories of gifts in particular.
- [13 : 00] And as we look at these verses, I want each of us to be asking ourselves the question, which of these two categories am I in? Because each one of us either has word gifts or ministry gifts.
- Let's look at each in turn. First of all, word gifts. Verse 11 again. He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers. Why, you say, does Paul single out these gifts?

Because these people have a unique role in preparing God's people for works of service. It's likely that Paul intends us to see the apostles and prophets as foundation gifts for the church.

It's what he says back in chapter 2, verse 20, as he describes the church as built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. The apostles, most obviously, the original 12 plus Paul.

The prophets, less easy perhaps to define, not the Old Testament prophets, but most likely those who spread the teaching of the apostles before it was widespread and circulated in written form in the New Testament.

[14 : 12] And they're described as foundational gifts in Ephesians, which means they haven't continued because, of course, they don't need to continue because we now do indeed have the New Testament in written form.

Whereas, verse 11, the gifts of the evangelists and the pastor teachers are, I take it, gifts that do continue. Evangelists with a gift for planting new churches, bringing people to put their trust in Jesus, and then the teachers who pastor those churches.

Let us believe that pastors and teachers, it's not two different kinds of people with two different roles. In other words, you could either be a pastor or a teacher.

In the original, it's simply the pastor teacher. So this is one person, the pastor teacher person. The word pastor simply means shepherd and the way in which a pastor shepherds a congregation is by teaching God's word, the pastor teacher.

Those are the word gifts. What about the ministry gifts? Well, verse 12, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

[15 : 33] Now, two questions for us from verse 12. The first, who are the saints? Who are the saints? We'll turn back to Ephesians chapter 1, verse 1, which tells us, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

Every member of the church in Ephesus was a saint. Just as every person here this morning who is following Jesus Christ is a saint.

So, abolish all thoughts for a moment of stained glass windows and people wearing halos and all that kind of thing. Everyone who has put their trust in Jesus Christ is a saint.

That's the first question. That leads to the second question from verse 12. Who does the ministry? Have a look at the verse. Who does the ministry? The saints do the ministry.

So, back to our question. Have you worked out which of these two categories you are in? Are you a verse 11 person with the word gifts? Or are you a verse 12 person with ministry gifts?

[16 : 47] Okay, if you put your trust in Jesus, you are in either one of those two. Which do you self-identify as? So, let's just clarify our roles here at Grace Church.

I am the pastor teacher and each one of you if you belong to Jesus Christ is a minister.

my responsibility is to pass to you by teaching not in a kind of academic way simply accumulating knowledge for the sake of it kind of way but actually verse 12 in a very purposeful way to equip you for ministry.

The word ministry simply means service in the New Testament and it's as you then do the work of ministry that Grace Church grows.

So, who builds the church? Who builds Grace Church? You do. Who equips the builders?

[17 : 58] I do. It's not how we think is it? It's not how we think. I guess it begs the question is your picture of church life that of a bus or that of an orchestra?

You know how it is on the bus there's the driver who does all the work and the passengers who enjoy the rides. The passengers can spot by driving a mile off they enjoy being on a bus with a reputation for being well driven.

Many of the passengers have been on the bus for a long time although they tend not to know those who have come on board more recently while some are very particular about where they do or don't sit.

You see a church like that hasn't begun to grow. It is full of passengers not ministers. Whereas a healthy church should be much more like an orchestra where everyone has a part to play if the music is to sound as the composer intended.

And the conductor rather than running around from chair to chair trying to play all the different instruments in turn actually the conductor enables each one to play such that the sound that's produced is the one the composer intended.

[19 : 23] Is your view of church that of a bus or an orchestra? etc. It's why by the way if I can put it like this it's why I am very important.

It doesn't feel particularly comfortable saying it. I guess it feels rather odd hearing it. But the pastor teacher you see is vital for the health of the church because he equips the ministers for ministry.

Pray for your pastor teacher value them consider becoming one if you feel you have those gifts and be willing for your life and ministry to be shaped by what they say.

But of course as well as the pastor teacher being important and verse 12 shows doesn't it that actually everyone else is important as well because your job is to do the ministry. And just as it's impossible to be an authentic member of an orchestra without playing an instrument.

So it's impossible to be an authentic Christian without using the gifts that Jesus has given you to build the church and to serve the church.

[20 : 44] That is the strategy. The significance of the strategy understanding the strategy but then thirdly owning the strategy because there's no point in there having a strategy that no one is on board with.

As we've seen the pastor teacher doesn't grow the church directly. It's only as the saints do the work of ministry that the church grows into unity and maturity.

But you say what does that look like? Well verse 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

It's a beautiful picture isn't it? Adulthood the fullness of Christ meaning under the rule and authority of King Jesus and in his service.

And yet notice there's an inevitable alternative when people don't own the strategy. Verse 14 so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine by human cunning by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

[22 : 04] We were on the beach in Cornwall last summer and there was a particularly memorable day. The surf was so fierce that grown adults were just kind of being knocked down like matchsticks. It was extraordinary by the water.

Parents wisely kept their children out of the water because they knew that they didn't have a chance. Well that's the picture here isn't it? A child helpless being tossed around by the waves an alarming sight for any parent equally alarming for a church that is like that.

And yet I take it that in first century Ephesus just as in 21st century London where the church looks small where the world looks big actually it's all too easy to end up like this to end up like verse 14.

A church which accommodates to the shifting moral landscape of the culture. A church which loses confidence in Jesus' strategy for church growth and instead jumps on the latest bandwagon.

church because you see a church where the pastor teacher is not teaching the Bible faithfully a church where church members don't see themselves as ministers building the church a church like that is always going to be vulnerable.

[23 : 30] Instead verses 15 and 16 rather speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped when each part is working properly makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Now that little phrase speaking the truth in love means so much more than simply don't lie. Literally the phrase means truthing in love.

It's neither speaking the truth without love but nor is it just love without the truth. In other words it's not simply being friendly or just kind of engaging in nice small talk about sport or holidays or whatever it is.

No what Paul is speaking about here is that we are lovingly to apply the truth of God's word into each other's lives. into our own lives and then to help one another to do just the same.

That's how a church matures when the word of God is taught and applied and lived out together in our individual relationships. That is not something we can do on our own.

[24 : 52] We all need each other to help us to do it. And the result verse 16 is this wonderful picture of a fully functioning working growing loving church.

So are you on board with the strategy? Not just do you give a sense to it but are you on board with it?

Do you own it for yourself? Let me suggest three ways as we finish that if you are on board with the strategy three ways in which it will radically shape and change your sort of functional approach to church just to Sunday morning church let alone anything else.

First of all it will radically shape how you walk into church. I take it it means we'll walk into church with a ministry mindset not simply coming for our own benefit but with a ministry mindset that is coming to serve others.

It might involve reading the Bible passage beforehand so we can engage much better with the sermon. Praying beforehand that we'd be equipped for ministry that we'd have opportunities to serve others.

[26 : 28] I take it we won't simply arrive just in time to slip in two minutes either side of 10.30 but instead we'll get here early ready and eager to serve.

And yes of course for those of us with young children it's a scramble isn't it to get anywhere on time but I take it that actually we want to model to our children that church is about going to serve others rather than simply going for what we can get out of it.

And then having walked into church where do we sit? Do we always sit in the same place or with our friends or with the people we get on well with? Or how about sitting with that person who's new or that person we know is having a rough time or that person is on their own?

Where we sit in church says a lot about our mindset in church. Have we come with a ministry mindset or have we come to serve ourselves mindset?

It will radically shape how you listen in church. You see may I ask what's going on in your mind now as you listen to this sermon? are we simply accumulating knowledge?

[27 : 51] Or do we see this as a training exercise and equipping exercise? If you're leading Sunday club to equip you for that ministry, if you're helping with scallywags tomorrow morning to equip you for that ministry, if you're engaged in lunchtime ministry up in the city to equip you for that ministry, if you're in a prayer triplet to help you to speak the truth in love to others when you next meet in your prayer triplet?

In other words, we don't simply listen to it for ourselves. I still remember as a very immature Christian going to church and I think really rating the sermon by how much I got out of it.

And so, you know, if I went to church on a Sunday and the sermon seemed to address a particular issue that I was facing in my life at that particular time, then I used to leave church rejoicing, thinking I got a lot out of it.

But actually, if the sermon didn't particularly address issues I was facing, then I felt rather cheated and a bit flat. It's a rather selfish way, wasn't it, of listening to a sermon.

You see, if only I'd had a I'm being equipped to serve others mindset instead. The sermon may not address issues I am facing at the moment, but it may well help me to speak the truth in love to others who are facing those issues at the moment or who may be facing those issues in a month's time or in two months' time.

[29 : 21] And it will radically shape how we speak in church as we seek to speak the truth in love to one lover.

It could just be turning to your neighbor after the service or over coffee and asking, how do you think the sermon might shape your life? Or saying, I think this is how I'd like to put this passage into practice this week.

What do you think it might mean for you? Or perhaps sharing a Bible verse with someone who we know is having a difficult time. Think of the difference it would make to our gatherings every single Sunday if each of us had one conversation like that every Sunday morning.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? If each of us had one conversation like that every Sunday morning. You see, what will it take for Grace Church to grow in 2019?

Well, I guess many of us would say we need to be a church with good Bible teaching. And while that's a good place to start, Ephesians 4 will not allow us to stop there.

[30 : 39] I think many of us have been drilled to think a good church equals a church with good Bible teaching. But Ephesians 4 won't allow us to stop there. Because a church in which there is good Bible teaching but with little Bible responding is not a biblical church and will not grow because people won't be being trained and equipped.

What we need just as much as Bible teaching is Bible responding, Bible obeying, if you like. Because it's only as we obey God's word and respond to God's word that we are equipped for ministry.

And it's only as we minister, as you, the ministers, minister, that Grace Church will then grow.

do. Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. When each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for this blueprint you've given us for church growth. Thank you that we're not simply left to our own devices to work out how to build the church.

[32 : 03] Thank you for this strategy of the risen Lord Jesus. And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us, Grace Church, this coming year. We pray that you would help each one of us to use the gifts you've given us, that as your word is taught, so ministers would be equipped and trained for ministry, that as we do the ministry that you've given us to do, so you would graciously grow Grace Church Dulwich this year, that we might indeed be mature, growing, and not drifting as a local church in 2019, bringing glory to the risen Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.