

The State of the Church Part 1

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Bible Text: Ephesians 4:1-16
Preached on: Sunday, September 4, 2022

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Turn with me in your Bibles to the 4th chapter of Ephesians. Ephesians 4. This is a launching point for our message today. I wanted to, after coming back off of sabbatical, I hope to share the benefit of that time and some of the insights the Lord has given me and I wanted to take some time to do that, so this is the fourth Sunday back, a sabbatical that the church graciously granted me from June 9th to August 11th. It was rest, to work on my doctoral project and then also to have time for study and reflection on the church and the state of the ministry here, spiritual climate, what God may want to be doing. I do want to give an update on my doctoral project to those who have been praying for me. I finished my writing on Friday, so I've completed all the chapters for my project. Praise the Lord. I'm so glad that's off my mind. Still a little bit of editing to do, but the lion's share is done so and I trust the Lord's going to use it. It went beyond my hopes as far as how things came together, and I trust the Lord is going to use it in our congregation to make us a church that is more welcoming to persons of all levels of ability and various challenges. So excited about that.

The main focus, though, of the sabbatical wasn't the doctoral project, it was really to provide some perspective for where the church is and where I see my need to focus going forward in years to come. I mentioned it was two months, so we spent a lot of time reading, read some new books, reread some older books that I had read before, visited other churches, like-minded churches, some on our travels when we went to a church in Oklahoma, a church in Alabama, and also four churches in the Atlanta area, like-minded churches. Had meetings with other pastors and that was probably one of the real highlights was having some time to really talk through ministry and hear their stories and kind of where their churches are. And in doing all of that, the Lord was so gracious. There's something powerful about really stepping back and the perspective that you gain once sort of the dust settles and you can see a little more clearly. It's just such a blessing. And so it was really a tremendous blessing thinking about the church, the strengths, the weaknesses, spiritual needs, opportunities. Sort of like a health assessment, kind of like going for a checkup, you know, you're going along through your life and sometimes you realize I've got to go get that checkup and so you do, and sometimes there's a number of tests. Well, they always do a number of different things. They check your vital signs, blood pressure, your pulse, respiration, do blood work, sometimes perform other types of examinations, EKG and other things like that so they can get an assessment of how the

physical health of your body is. And so there's a sense in which I think this was something of a unique opportunity for the church and for me in trying to assess that.

And so the title of the message this morning is "The State of the Church." The state of the church really looking at where are we now? Where do we go from here? And the passage that I've chosen is a passage which presents to us the glory of the church and really where the church should always be going. So it's the target. Ephesians 4:1-16, perhaps the most exalted portrait of the church in all of Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4:1,

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." 9 (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. 14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

What a majestic portrait of the church. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we come today asking again for grace and rejoicing that in Jesus Christ we find all grace. He is the One who has made known to us grace and truth and we come this morning, Lord, asking that You might through Your grace transform our understanding more and more into conformity with Your perfect will and Your perfect word. We pray that we would see ourselves as we are rightly in relation to this glorious organism, this glorious creation of Your sovereign grace, the church of Jesus Christ. Help us to understand where we are as a body corporately and where we are

individually, and help us truly to set our hearts more faithfully to follow our glorious Savior. We pray in His name. Amen.

So the state of the church. Tomorrow, actually, September 5th, marks 29 years ago that I preached my first sermon as pastor of this church, and so in thinking back and thinking this summer and just reflecting on all of that, it's been very enriching to have the time to step back and think about where we're going. Like I said, the dust gets kind of, just the dust of activity kind of swirls around you and you lose a little bit of perspective and a little bit of clarity. And so today I want us to begin looking at this subject, the state of the church. It's going to take us probably three weeks to do this. So this is part one, "The State of the Church Part 1," and the first point I want us to think about is how we got here. How we got here, that's our first point. To understand where we are, where we're going, it's helpful to think about how we got here. In fact, it's something we see the Scriptures do continually.

One of the Old Testament prophet's favorite things to do, and certainly the psalmist's favorite things to do is to recount God's faithfulness in the past to give you confidence for the challenges you face in the present, or that you may face in the future. We draw strength from what God has done in the past and so how we got here. You know, it's also just thinking about the blessing of that and sharing with one another, isn't it one of the great joys in the Christian life to hear personal testimonies? What a powerful testimony of the man who wrote the hymn, "I know whom I have believed," and just to hear that recounting of how God brought him to himself makes us love God more, trust God more, rejoice in God's goodness, and that's what we're called to do to each other. That's part of why we sometimes you might hear someone ask you, "Share your testimony with me. Tell me how you came to faith. How did God bring you to himself? Where are you with your walk with the Lord?" And so we share our testimonies and we talk to one another and we listen to one another and we give glory to God. One of the parts that I always love this part of the membership process when we interview new members, this is part of what we get to hear is how the Lord has worked in their lives.

But it's something we should always be ready to talk about and share about, and one of the parts of it is also how did God bring you to this church? In his sovereign working in your life, how did he bring you to be a part of Providence today or whenever you came to this place? Something really encouraging from learning to step back and see the hand of God and how he's orchestrated it, because you remember in the moments we always feel like in the present we sometimes, we don't know what God's doing, right? Don't you feel like that? Sometimes you really feel like that. "I have no idea what the Lord is doing right now." And we have a high view of the sovereignty of God, we know he's doing everything that's happening is being done according to his will and according to his purpose. The doctrine of providence itself, the name of our church, means that God foreordains everything that comes to pass. Whatsoever comes to pass, God has ordained for his sovereign purposes, his glory, and the good of everyone who loves Jesus Christ. So when you deal with that in your life though, when we're looking at it in real time, don't we find ourselves so often saying, "I have no idea what the Lord is doing in my life right now. I don't understand why this is happening." Well, when we get past that and we

then see, "Wait a minute, now I see. This was his good purpose in that particular affliction. This was the blessing that he intended to bring to me out of the perplexity and confusion that I was experiencing." And we need to learn to savor those things, and then to share them as points of praise to encourage one another.

And so I want to take some time this morning to talk a little bit about the history of the church, and I think we need to take time, I encourage you to take time in days and weeks and months to come to be more intentional about even asking those kinds of questions and sharing those things with each other. But I want to tell you the history of the church, so we think about where we are today, September 4, 2022. This church was birthed in August of 1983 and the birth of the church, this particular church, was out of basically the pastor wasn't fired from another church in the area, Mount Tabor Baptist Church is between here and Norcross. He wasn't fired but the leadership was really rising up against him in such a way that he believed it was best for him to plant another church and essentially it was over the issues of inerrancy, the inerrancy of Scripture, the clarity of the gospel, and the way that the church should be involved in missions. Those were the three things that led the founding pastor of this church, David Picard, to start this congregation. And so the inerrancy of Scripture. He was a believer in the absolute inerrancy of the Bible at a time when many churches within the Southern Baptist Convention were rejecting that, and he also believed the church should be free to support missionaries outside of the normal just Baptist way. If you know Southern Baptist life about the cooperative program, if you don't, that's something you can ask one of your friends. It's not worth taking time on right here except to say that he believed that the church should be willing to support missionaries directly. And he also wanted the gospel proclaimed, the gospel of salvation, grace alone, through Christ alone.

So he started the church in 1983. He moved on from here in 1991. The church had a couple of difficult years after he left, and in 1993, well, Patti and I returned here. We'd actually, some of you may not know this particular thing. I don't know if I mentioned this in the membership class. There's a little video on the history of the church that some of this is in, but David Picard actually asked me to become a youth minister at this church in 1986. So I was a youth minister here from '86 to '88 and then left to go to seminary and I went to Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, MS and I never expected, Patti and I never expected to come back to our hometown or to this church when we left. And then five years later, long story short, we came back. The church after those two years of difficulty, after, David had moved to Chattanooga to another church, they called us and so we came.

And the church, as I said, was committed to the inerrancy of Scripture, and to, you know, following the Spirit's leading in missions to the gospel, but when we came, we as a pastor now, I could see that there were areas of strengths and weaknesses. One of the weaknesses was the church was not doctrinally deep. They were not as deep as they needed to be in the doctrines of the faith, leadership was not as sound as it needed to be, we didn't have elders in the church. The first seven years of our pastorate, our time here, we were trying to begin moving in some new directions and I was also learning because I actually think back to it, if I could have counseled the church in 1993 about me, I would

have said, "Don't hire that guy. What are you thinking?" And if I'd been counseling myself, I'd say, "What are you thinking about going to that church?" I mean, we were a match made in heaven, though. The Lord knows what he's doing.

And so we learned together and then seven years in, we kind of had a crisis in leadership. It was interesting the way God worked. The summer of 2000, I knew we were not on the same page on things. I was seeing, I was trying to lead the church to adopt elder leadership. We had a number of men who were, some of them were present deacons at the time, and there were other men that I thought could be potential elders and there's a leadership team I had formed of nine men. And so we were working on moving toward elder leadership, and I asked the guys, "Let's devote a week of prayer. And if you want fast sometime during this week, fast. Let's pray." And so, and we, maybe not to the whole church, but particularly Patti and I were really devoting our hearts to praying, and we were praying for unity of leadership around a common vision. A unified vision around a common vision. That's what we felt like we're not on the same page, we need to get on the same page.

And so we're praying that way and in the middle of that week, I always remember this because it showed me that, you know, if you haven't fasted before, it's a great thing to do. You know, you need to be wise about it. You need to check with your doctor and stuff like that about how exactly you should. But there's something powerful about it, but it's never pleasant. And you know, usually my times of fasting have never been spiritual highs in the moment. Usually the blessing comes later. And this was an example of that. That week, in the middle of the week, I got a call from one of the men who was on that leadership team. He was actually a deacon at that time, and he told me there was a secret meeting planned. I don't mean a secret, they hadn't told me about it. They were all going to meet and talk about the church and about me and so my weaknesses and deficiencies and things which I'm sure would have given a lot of time for a good discussion. We're going to have this meeting in six parts, part 1 today, part 2 next week. But anyway so this brother called me. He was concerned and he called me and I said, "Listen, you know, hey that's really good that you want to meet and talk. Would it be better if I were there so you could just share these things directly with me and just open your hearts?"

And so we did meet and it was a good meeting. It was a little painful, of course, but it was good. But one of the things that came out of that was I could see even more clearly, "Wow, we really aren't on the same page." And so what happened then is over, it's kind of amazing, I would have thought, looking back at it, they should have probably fired me and hired somebody that was where they wanted to go because most of the guys on that nine person leadership team really had more of a mindset of moving in a Seeker Sensitive direction as a church. So it wasn't so apparent. It wasn't like we were using those labels, but it became clear.

And so anyway, over the next year and a half what happened was slowly they kept leaving. I mean, I, like I said, they should have fired me. I mean, I say should have. I'm surprised they didn't. We thought that they were probably going to. But as it turned out, over the next year and a half, seven of those nine people left the church. So nine leaders,

seven leave, and when seven key leaders leave, people start leaving. It's only common sense. I mean, if you're on a cruise ship and you see people in uniforms getting in lifeboats, what are you going to do? So a lot of people started getting in lifeboats and leaving. And so we found ourselves right before Maggie was born, Easter, the day after Easter, 2001, really spending some time just asking, you know, what are we supposed to do? We're still here, they've left, but the church is almost gone, too. Is this what we were supposed to do? You know, honey, I shrunk the church.

So we kept praying and the Lord started then sending in people that year who wanted a church like what God had done during that time was really crystallized for me and made me more firmly committed to the sufficiency of Scripture, that Scripture is not just what drives our messages, it's what drives our methods. Our ministry must conform to the word of God. God tells us how he's to be worshiped. God tells us how we're to build his church. And so this time of struggle and working through these things helped me to see that more clearly and me and Patti to come to that kind of deeper, more firm convictions, and then the Lord started bringing people in who had the same convictions. And you know, I was thinking about this, I think about some of you who were here through the difficulty and you stayed. You didn't get on the lifeboats. How grateful I am for you. And then those of you came in shortly after the exodus and were like, "Hey, this is where we need to be." And how good God is. He answered the prayer that I'd prayed during that prayer and fasting week, gave us a unified leadership around a common vision. About 2 1/2 years after that, you know, after about a year after we lost seven of those nine people, and then another year later, we suddenly have a new leadership core that's basically we're all pulling the same direction. And I was like, "Wow. The ways of God. How unsearchable are His judgments, unfathomable His ways." And through that kind of circumstance, he does something deeper in us, doesn't he? The affliction opens our hearts, and things go deeper.

So for the last, that's really since about 2002, about 20 years we've been pulling the same direction and what a joy it's been, and the Lord has brought so many of you. As I was thinking about this, I think about, you know, So-and-so came in 2001, So-and-so came in 2002. I'm pretty good at remembering basically the rough, I kind of think in terms of numbers so I kind of remember, you know, in 2003, 2004, a bunch of people came in 2006. I could look at a bunch of you and start saying, "Yeah 2006." Some of you came in the teens and the various stages of the years and some of you just came today maybe and you don't even know you're supposed to be here, but apparently you are. But what a joy it is to look and see, wow, what God has done in his faithfulness in the past to bring us to where we are today. And there's a story for each person here, each one of you who believe you're supposed to be here as a part of this body there is a story like that in your life of how God worked to bring you here. How God worked to connect you to this group of people. It's other brothers and sisters whom you're getting to know and you're getting to love, and you're beginning to serve and to be served by them, and you're to work together for the connection that we were talking about in Ephesians 4.

Such a beautiful picture that as each person is equipped by the leaders of the church through the teaching of the word, equipped for ministry, and they start doing their part

according to their giftedness, and it's the key thing is, as they're doing their ministry, it's the truth that builds. Speaking the truth in love the church grows up in all things into the head, and what he's describing is this is a passage just to meditate on and to see the pictures, he is describing that corporately a local church with all the various gifts present, learning to love Jesus above everything else and love one another as ourselves, that as we serve one another, as we meet one another's needs, we somehow look like Jesus corporately. That is that when someone... this is happening, we don't see it with our own eyes but it is happening and it can happen more and more as we get more involved and we get better at serving. But think about this, what was it like for a person of profound spiritual need to come into the presence of Jesus and to experience his powerful words, his words of comfort and salvation. What joy filled the hearts. You know, people like we talked about Mary Magdalene last week, seven demons, a prostitute. She becomes a blood-bought child of the King, precious to her Savior, the ministry of Jesus impacting her. What he's saying here, Paul is saying that what God wills in this epoch of his story, his church history, is that when people come in contact with the corporate body, they experience the touch of Jesus in just that profound way that Mary Magdalene experienced it. None of us in ourselves is able to do all that Jesus did, but as you use your gift, someone comes into this body broken, not knowing which way is up, not knowing what to do, and they find in some of you the gift of mercy and you mourn with those that mourn, you listen, you care, you love, and then they come in contact with others who have the gift of giving or service and know how to help them practically to begin to put things together in their life, showing them how just basic things need to be done, others the gift of encouragement to say, "Hey, I'm coming alongside you to help you to follow Jesus." Others with the gift of teaching. The gift of administration. All the spiritual gifts come together in the touch that happens here on this particular Sunday and on this Tuesday evening, and a phone call that happens on Friday morning, and then next Sunday and then the following Wednesday, and suddenly this person who came in here not so far from somebody like Mary Magdalene can then experience transformation and the same kind of experience that Mary Magdalene had encountering Jesus, she has had encountering the body of Christ. We are his hands and feet and the Spirit working in us animates us to that purpose. What an amazing, astonishing reality that God would choose to make himself known in that way. You see, we need a higher view of the church. This is what the church is. This is what we have been called to and this is what he will equip us for because he is faithful. The only thing that we need is faith and a faith that acts.

So how we got here. Secondly, where we are. Where we are. I have two words here, two sub points under the second point where we are. The first word is I think healthy, relatively healthy church. If you check the vital signs of our church, the spiritual blood pressure, the pulse, the respiration, central nervous system, we're healthy. I mean, the word is the foundation. The gospel is clear. There's a sense in which we're calling one another to holiness. We're striving after obedience and faithfulness to God. I look around and as I said, I was thinking about over the last years and we talked about this, our family, just the wonderful, you know, God has gathered a wonderful group of people here. So amazingly privileged. We should feel amazingly privileged to serve with you. Patti and I are just overjoyed, Jon and Maggie to grow up in this congregation. The kindness of God. Loving, kind, joyful people who serve one another and care for one

another very well. Not perfectly, but amazingly well. So often as I've talked to someone who has gone through a difficulty, some illness or, you know, Ted mentioned Jack's heart procedure this week that came out of nowhere and he probably experienced this, all the texts, he was talking about trying to text one-handed because he couldn't move his other arm because they had done the cath through his arm. And he's trying to text one-handed, actually. I started thinking it's impossible almost. But anyway, he was getting so many texts of encouragement and prayer. That's an awesome thing. What a gift the Lord has given each of us in one another.

So I say healthy. He's gathered a wonderful group of people. He's gathered a mature group of people, a biblically and theologically mature group. I mean, we're in all different places, of course, and we're all different places in different areas of our understanding of theology, but as a whole, it's really pretty impressive. As I talk with you guys, I'm constantly like, wow. Sometimes after, often after a sermon, somebody will be talking about the sermon and what they'll say to me after, I'll find myself saying, "I wish I'd said what you just said. You said it so much better." Well-studied, theologically informed, spiritually discerning. So a wonderful group of people, a mature group of people, a gifted group of people. You see the spiritual gifts and the abilities of our people is just really something. I mean, the Lord has not left us, he's not left the cupboard bare in any way. We are abundantly supplied. So much to offer. So many of you, you just blow me away in the way that you operate and to see God's gift in your life.

So I would say the first word is healthy. Where are we now? Well, we're healthy. Well, we would check out pretty healthy. Now the second word is the negative side and I think this is mostly a reflection of what the Lord is trying to teach me and the elders, but the second word is stuck. Healthy but stuck. There are ways in which we're just kind of not able to do what we should be able to do. And it's not from, it's not really from a lack of desire to do it, it's just from sort of the patterns that have developed. One of my conversations with a pastor friend, actually blessed today to have Brian and Barb Kamer here from Alabama. That's one of the churches I went to was their church when we stayed with them in Huntsville. And Paul Lamey their pastor, I was sharing about their own growth and he was talking about the metaphor of how you grow up and mature in your physical, I mean, your life. You know, you're a little child, then you become a teenager, then you become a young adult, then you get, you know, more responsibility, if you're married, then you have a family. But regardless, whether you marry not, you are developing new ways of thinking. Isn't it amazing how differently you think as an adult than you did as a child? I mean, you kind of understand kids don't think about certain things. They don't think about why, you know, how much the power costs. Or why, you know, rocking back in your chair, as pleasant as that is, that's always been temptation for me, you know, leaning back in the chair, it damages the chair over time. I didn't think about that for the first maybe for me it had been 45 years, I don't know. It took a while until we had to replace some chairs. I'm like, "Oh, I understand why, you know, Mom and Dad said don't do that." I thought they were just trying to be killjoys, or they were afraid I was going to fall over. "I've got this. I'm balanced. No problem." No, there's other things that you come to see, right? You understand life from a different way as you mature and you get to another step and you understand the value of money in a different

way, you understand the value of hard work, you understand the cost that goes into certain pursuits and activities.

And so it's a function of the normal growth process and so what happens is when you get to a new level, because you've grown to a new level, you have that challenge and so there's a sense in which you feel stuck in a way because you're just trying to get used to now being a young adult. You're figuring this out. And Paul was saying that, Paul Lamey was saying that, that that's something that just it's a function of just the normal growth process of a church. And then you also know other friends we're grateful to have here today in God's providence, Ray and Deborah Gentry who've been a blessing to our church in so many ways and Ray's been helping us look at things. They're here worshiping with us today and Ray and I talked about this, that there are certain things that happen when you get to a certain number of people. It's like you get to a certain number of people and you just can't do things the way you always did them because it's just impossible to have the kind of connection if you don't do some things with some new intentionality.

And we have found ourselves at that place and I think what we've done, this was what was good for me to step back because I feel like I've tried to be faithful to the preaching and teaching of the word, I've tried to be faithful in my counseling to minister the word to people, but I don't think I've thought enough about this area until the sabbatical helped me think more about the urgency of, "Oh, how do we move to the next level? How do we think in this new area of growth in a way to apply the same biblical principles now to the new situation?" Because in reality, I mentioned earlier that of such a group of gifted people, but one of the areas I've really felt like when I was as I was praying and thinking through the sabbatical, reflecting on the things I was reading, the Scriptures and the books I was reading, the thing that came to me was I feel like we're being, as wonderful as this church is, we're being less effective and actually much less effective than we could be starting with me and the elders.

We have a wonderful group of men. I mean, think about it, you guys heard preaching for nine weeks from four different elders and other men in our church, and of course, staff member Dalton preaching twice and what a blessing. The work of God in these men's lives. And like I said, it's such a privilege to serve alongside them. But what the Lord was showing me was like I could be more effective if I would be more focused and intentional knowing now this new place God has us. I need to streamline and focus and think through, recalibrate my ministry and I feel like it's true for every one of our elders too, that we all need to, sort of reexamine and refine what we're doing, why we're doing it, and in a lot of places we need to give way more ministry. We need to let others come alongside us. We need to spend time training because we have so many gifted people that need to use their gifts, to have outlets for their ministry.

So I would say we're like a really healthy person that's as healthy as you can be when you're not exercising like you ought to. It's kind of like me, I check out pretty good on the heart and all that, but I'm not exercising that much and I should physically be exercising. Now I just confessed that to you. Pray for me. And hold me accountable. Oh no. Okay.

That wasn't in my notes for sure. But it's an exciting place to be. I mean, I am so excited to think about what God is going to do as we look at the things that need to happen and think about them differently, think about them biblically, but think about them not in the same old, same old ways but apply the Scriptures with freshness to the questions that we now are asking that I think we needed to ask all along. How are we faithful to shepherd this number of people? How do we do what God tells us to do in his word now in this setting? How do we get more people involved in serving so that we can see him grow up the body more by unleashing their gifts and his work in their lives?

So we want to move from where we are healthy but stuck and so that's the second point. We've looked at how we got here, we've looked at where we are, and now we want to look at where we go from here, and this is the point that we're going to be on for a couple more weeks. So we're going to start into it today, where we go from here?

I think we need to make some fundamental changes in the way we think. I was helped by this, I was helped in this by the book "The Trellis and the Vine," a book I read a number of years ago, one of those books I reread a little bit recently. So many wonderful books, "The Church is a Culture of Care," Dale Johnson, "Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands," Paul Tripp. These are books, some of the books I read. "The Pastors Ministry," Brian Croft. "The Peacemaker," Ken Sande. Just tremendous books, but in "The Trellis and the Vine," they make the point that the way we need to, essentially the argument of the book is that the vine is the church, and the church's spiritual life and vitality is the vine, that is, people's real relationship with Christ, that's the vine but you have to have a trellis to have a vine thrive. Think about that. You know, you usually don't have a vine laying on the ground, it's not going to do as well as if you put up a trellis, you have a grapevine, you go out into a place where they grow grapes and you see this, they grow them on, you know, trellises or whatever you call that, one that's just in the middle and you know what I'm talking about. Or maybe you don't. Look it up on, Google it all right? So you've got to have the vine off the ground and as the vine grows, sometimes the trellis has to be expanded otherwise the vine will not continue to thrive. That's essentially what's happened. We have a healthy vine but the trellis work has not been done sufficiently to support the vine's health and we need to do some trellis work. So one of the ways they talk about that in the book too is that to change, they call it make some fundamental mind shifts to change the way we think about certain things. And I want to share two today, briefly each one. This will begin to kind of frame what we're going to do in the next two weeks, too.

And the first is, this is one that they use this word for word, some of these I'm just looking at personalizing ourselves and not necessarily from the book, but this one is from the book: we need to change from being gap-driven to gift-driven. From being gap-driven to gift-driven. And we think about how the church operates, we need to move from filling gaps to finding gifts. It doesn't mean that you don't care about the gap, you know, we've got to have this particular class has got to be covered. Yes, it does but it takes a little more intentionality to think about how do we discover the people with gifts who could fill this gap? Not just who's the first person that will answer the call? Fill the gap. That's kind of been the way we've tended to do it, and that's the way I tended to do it, the easy

way. And not realizing that that's really not, that's not the best way for the body. It's better to try to do it in the more strategic and intentional way where you find out what people gifts are. So we need to be moving from gap-driven to gift-driven. The focus isn't just to fix the problem but to find the person or persons and then release their gifts.

Now in saying that, there's a number of passages on spiritual gifts in the New Testament. The four main passages are Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, which we read last week; Ephesians 4:7 and 11 to 16 which we read this morning; and 1 Peter, 4:10 and 11. Now they talk about spiritual gifts but there's not a test in the Bible to find your spiritual gift. It's not, you know, Titus 2:4 here's the test. No, it's not there. I've said some somewhat less than positive things about spiritual gifts tests in the past, sort of been forced to reconsider that a little bit. Still my main point, I think, was accurate. People put too much stock in that. But I don't think it's necessarily a bad idea. It's just not the main thing. It's a supplemental thing. There's some gifts tests that try to test, particularly the gifts in Romans 12. That's where you have the seven gifts: prophecy, teaching, administration, exhortation, giving mercy and service. Thank you. And so those tend to be, I think, motivational gifts. You look at a problem and you're motivated in some way to fix some part of the problem. I've used that illustration and I'll just have to use it again. Sorry for those who've heard it a dozen times, but the person, I think it's such a helpful illustration. You're at a dinner party. There's eight people. The person carrying the platter in, we don't know what their spiritual gift is and it doesn't matter. So they drop the food. It falls on the floor. And now everybody is waiting on this one tray of food and it falls on the floor and so what happens is the other seven people have the other seven spiritual gifts that we just listed from Romans 12, and so they act out of their gift. They see a need and they respond in accordance with their gift. The person with the gift of prophecy, which sees things more black and white and sees solve the problem, call out the sin, call out the issue, says, "You know, you really should be more careful. You weren't being careful." The person with the gift of teaching wants to really help them think through, yeah, they kind of agrees with that but like, "Really, I think the problem was it was imbalanced. You need to balance things better next time by putting some of the food on this side and not just all on that side." And so then the gift of exhortation. They gift of mercies like, "Oh, you must feel terrible." They're already tearing up in their own eyes to sympathize with the person's pain. The person with the gift of giving is like, "Hey, listen, I've got, I've got \$50.00 right now. I'll call pizza. I'm, you know, ready to do that." Anyway, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Then the last gift of course, is the gift of administration saying, "Hey, Bill, get a mop. Sally, get a broom. Jim, call for pizza," etc. You know, that's the gift of administration, and then the gift of service has already cleaned up the whole mess and gotten it in the trash can while everybody else was talking about it.

Well, so what happens is God really does, he wires us like that. That's what Romans 12 I think is saying. So you have there's a sense in which need is there, the Spirit's working, he's given a gift that that drives you and impels you to move toward that gift. And so more than a test that you fill out is kind of look for needs around you, move toward them and see what your bent is, what are you seeing about that need, because each one of those people was seeing that need slightly differently because they were seeing it through their

gift. And so the real way to discover your spiritual gift, though we may, you may see some tests out sometime around here. I'm not saying you won't, but the real way to discover your spiritual gift is to look for pressing needs and meet them.

The key word in the book of Titus is the book good deeds or good works? Six times in Paul's letter to Titus, it's a pastoral epistle, Titus is a pastor. This letter is written by Paul to a pastor, not to the church at Corinth or the church at Ephesus or the church at Crete where Titus is. No, it's written to the pastor, Titus. That's why Timothy, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, pastoral epistles. He's written to the man, not the church. Paul tells him there, "You need to make sure that the people devote themselves to good deeds, to good works," that the role of the church is we're all to be working and serving, or as Ephesians 4:12 said, we're all called to be equipped for the work of ministry. The word "work of service" in the New American Standard that I'm reading could be better translated the "work of ministry," that the role of pastor/teachers, pastors and elders is to equip all of the holy ones, all of the members of the body to get to work and the work is ministry. And so Titus, Paul is telling Titus again and again and again, "Our people must be careful to engage in good deeds. Get to work. Get to work. Get to work." That's what he says over and over and over again.

And the last example of that is in chapter 3, verse 14, Titus 3:14, where it says must be carefully engaged in good deeds. In good deeds you must be careful to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs. So look for pressing needs, move to meet them, and then evaluate your heart as you do, as you come on the other side of it. "Lord, how are You gifting me?" Now you don't wait. You know, it's like if I don't have the gift of service, so I'm not going to help clean up. That's not the way we're supposed to operate. The goal is for us to have all the gifts eventually to be like Jesus. You've got all the gifts. Jesus, think about Jesus. No one ever spoke with authority like Jesus. Who had to get to prophecy more than Jesus? No one. Who could teach better than Jesus? No one. Who could encourage better than Jesus? No one. Who could mourn with those who mourn better than Jesus? No one. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Who could serve better than Jesus? No one. There he is girding himself with a towel like a slave and washing his disciples' feet as he stands in front of Calvary. So Jesus did it all and we're called to do it all, but it doesn't change the fact that we're not going to be there tomorrow, and so the Lord's going to generally use your gift to get you moving. So look at how he gifts you and how he motivates you and then get to work. And we want to try to free you up to do more of the work.

I can't do this point justice, but I'm just going to share it with you briefly and then you can pray about it before next Sunday because we're going to stop in just a moment. But the second mind shift we're going to talk about mostly next week is to move from being risk-averse, to move from being risk-averse to bold in faith. Not to be afraid of what might happen but to be strong and courageous in moving forward to meet the need God has put before us. This is what we're called to do and I feel like too often you can be so concerned about messing up, you're thinking, "I'm trying to be faithful to Scriptures. I don't want to mess up. I don't want to mess up. I don't want to go outside of what God says," that you hold back. But when you look at the Scriptures, God doesn't want us to be

like that. He wants us to trust him, yes. To try our best to do what his word says, yes. But to launch out in boldness.

I mean the phrase "be strong and courageous" is something that is repeated again and again and again throughout Scripture. You see it in Joshua 1. That's a good place for homework this week, read Joshua 1. Joshua is about to take over from Moses. What a daunting task that must have been. I mean, think about that. Moses. What a leader. "Joshua, take it. Take it away, Joshua." The Lord tells him four different times in Joshua 1, "Be strong and courageous. I am with you. Be strong and courageous." David when he's about to die, he wants to build the temple and he gets all the things together for the temple, the Lord tells me he can't build the temple. Then he called Solomon together in 1 Chronicles 22, and he says, "Look, the Lord has put on my heart to build a temple for Him but He told me I can't because I'm a man with bloodshed. I've shed too much blood but my son is going to build the temple. And so you're going to build the temple, and I've gathered all these things together, and you must be strong and courageous to build the temple of God." And then five chapters, chapter 22 to chapter 26, he basically tells them, or 23 to 27, he tells them, he tells Solomon or the Scripture tells us all that David had done to prepare for the building of the temple. And in chapter 27, David again says to Solomon, "Be strong and courageous. God has put you in this place. I know it's a daunting task. You're saying, who am I? How can I possibly do it? God says be strong and courageous. I am with you."

That's what you and I are called to be like. Pray for us as leaders that we'll be that way, but pray for every single one of us that will be that way because every time you move toward need, real pressing need, what do you feel? You feel afraid and inadequate. "Lord, I can't help this person. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do." The Lord says, "Look, look at the need, think about My word, trust in Me, call out to Me, the Lord Jesus," and sometimes the most powerful prayer at all, say, "Lord, I have no idea what to say. I ask You to love them through me, speak through me," and you just open your mouth and you start talking. You don't start talking without praying like that, though. I mean, that prayer is a flare prayer. It goes up quickly. You don't have time to stop and say, "I'm going to pray for a minute over here." No you pray and then you speak and the Lord loves to use prayers like that. You're being strong and courageous and bold to step out, but you're not bold to step out in presumption. You're bold, stepping out in faith, trusting God in his word. God has put me in this situation to encounter this person with this need. I have Christ. I have the Spirit. I'm able, according to Romans 15:14, to admonish and to instruct and to teach. I'm full of all goodness and wisdom. I don't feel like it, but the Lord says I am. What does it matter what I feel like if it's what God says? Therefore, because he's told me that I'm going to minister to this person even though I don't feel able to. And what happens is the Spirit of God works through you, and mountains sometimes will be moved. If your faith is as a grain of a mustard seed, he moves mountains.

God wants to do that through his people and when we start having faith like that, more and more people who encounter this body will feel like they have been in the presence of the living Christ to the glory of our great Savior. He wills to do it this way. He chooses to

take people like you and me, as inadequate as we are, fill us with his Spirit, give us his word, launch us out in faith and use us to do what only he can do to change lives. Isn't that an awesome plan? Isn't that amazing? That's something that we need to not forget and we need to not neglect. Don't neglect the spiritual gift within you, as Paul said, "Timothy, stir it up."

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your great gift to us in the gospel, the unspeakable, indescribable privilege of being your children, to have gone from being enemies to being beloved sons and daughters through belief in Jesus Christ alone. His righteousness changes everything for us. We come as sinners, rebels, hopeless, helpless, and He gives us a standing before You because we just simply cry out to You and say, "Save me." And then not only children, but now part of the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth, the hands and feet of Jesus. Lord, enlarge our vision. Make us stand in awe of You and the calling, and may we walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called to the end that Jesus Christ will be seen more clearly in our corporate midst, and that Jesus Christ may be seen more clearly in our personal lives. We pray these things that truly He may be praised for He is worthy. Amen.