

Jesus Is Our Gracious King

How do you celebrate your accomplishments? A couple of days ago, Camille finished a whole year of dance lessons. And she had her recital. We celebrated all her hard work by going to *Eat and Park*. How do you celebrate your accomplishments? In the words we look at this evening, Jesus has accomplished something amazing. In the words that Paul uses here, he shows us that Jesus is our Gracious king. Paul writes: *"8 This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'"*

In these words Paul quotes a passage from the Old Testament, Psalm 68:19. This passage is a *Typical* prophecy. The earthly king celebrates his victory in two ways. First, he goes up and sits on his throne. And, second, he leads captives behind him. This passage is a picture of our Heavenly King, Jesus. After Jesus had defeated sin, death and the Devil, what did he do? He celebrated by going up to his throne in heaven. And he celebrated by dragging captives behind him.

This second way of celebrating is what we focus on this evening. In Psalm 68, the LORD says: *"When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you received gifts from men, even from the rebellious—that you, O LORD God, might dwell there."* Notice how Jesus celebrates. He drags the captives behind him. This was a common practice. Every king and general who went out to battle dragged behind him the people he had captured and had made into slaves.

Now, here is where it gets interesting. Some of those captives he holds in punishment forever. While others he sets free. He makes them gifts for himself. That might seem like a strange practice—to make gifts for himself. But, we do the same thing, don't we? Right now, Karin is busy planting tomatoes, peppers and flowers in the garden. She does this for herself primarily—so that she can see their beauty and eat the result. Jesus does the same thing. He takes some of these rebels, these people who were his enemies and sets them free, making them his friends, making them great and amazing gifts to himself.

I remember a classmate I had in college. Even though he was studying to be a Pastor, there were still many parts of his life in which he was a rebel. He ate too much. He drank too much. He smoked too much. He cursed like a Marine. And with all of those *wonderful* qualities, he thought it was strange that no girl would go out on a date with him. I saw him several months ago. And, it was amazing to see what Jesus had done to him. He has more muscle and less fat than I have. He is kind, compassionate and caring—not as a show on the outside, but as a genuine attitude on the inside. What a gift! What a gift to himself that Jesus would do! He took this man who was still rebellious in so many ways and made him into a gift for himself.

I mention this, because this is what Jesus is doing to you. Even though you were a rebel, Jesus set you free. He set you free and made you a gift to himself. And he receives you as a gift throughout your life. You're like that beautiful Dogwood tree in our front lawn. Every year during this time of the year it grows those beautiful white flowers. And their beauty to me isn't even really what they look like. It's their smell. They smell amazing. And every time you come to Jesus knowing your sins and the damage they do to you and those around you and repent of them, it's like another flower growing on tree. Every time you ask for strength to avoid temptation and to run away from evil, Jesus hears those prayers and, over time those flowers grow. And when they finally blossom they look and smell wonderful to him.

Jesus is our Gracious King. He receives gifts among men. That's how he celebrates his victory over sin, death and the Devil. But he celebrates his victory in yet another way: *"11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."*

Jesus celebrates his victory by setting some free. Then he does something amazing. He takes some of these gifts, these captives and shares them with others. He chooses men to serve in the public ministry. Notice in Paul's time the great diversity in types of ministry: Apostles, prophets, evangelists and others. We do not have exactly the same thing today. But we do have the public ministry. We do have pastors, teachers and evangelists who are called by you, the church to serve on their behalf. These are the gifts he shares with his church. Notice, these gifts

are not things, such as gold or silver. No, these gifts are people.

And what is it that these freed captives do? Paul tells us *"12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* These freed captives, your Pastors, have the privilege of sharing God's word with you. And notice what God's word does. It builds you up so that you have the full knowledge of Jesus.

Now, notice what it says here. You do not need the bible + something else. You do not need your pastor + someone else. Through God's word, you have the full knowledge about Jesus. There is nothing you lack. There is nothing you need. For, as Jesus once told his disciples, when you know the truth, the truth sets you free.

But Paul continues. These once rebellious, once captive men who share God's word to you bring something else into your lives: *"Eph. 4:14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."*

The effect of having these gifts, your pastors in your life is clear. As you gather together around God's word in bible study and his sacraments in worship, you are able to do something this sinful world cannot do. You are able to see the lies that this world is constantly whispering and telling you. And you are able to follow Jesus.

What does all of this mean to you? If one of the ways Jesus celebrates his Ascension and victory is by sending you pastors, then how should you think of your pastor? How should you think of what he does during the week and on Sunday morning? You rejoice in it. You rejoice in what your pastor does for you—not that he's so special and wonderful in and of himself. But, through him God lets you celebrate his victory over sin, death and the Devil. Through the words that he preaches in the pulpit, the words that he teaches in the classroom, and the sacraments he shares with you, he does all the things that God's word promises. Your faith is made more and more solid, day after day. You aren't being tossed around like a boat on a windy sea. No, you have the full knowledge of Jesus through his word.

Our King is a gracious King. He is a King who receives gifts. He sets the captives free and makes them his friends and gifts. And he shares those gifts too. He gives us pastors to give us strength, peace and truth through his word. Amen.