

Epiphany 4

Freely You Have Received

"Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8)

For years, I thought only of a PORTION of our verse for today only - the part that says, "...Freely you have received, freely give," and thought it simply related to money. And money does apply, for we are indeed to give to those who merely ask (as we can see in places like Matthew 5:42, where it commands, "GIVE to him who asks you"). But giving is much more than money, as we can see right here in Matthew 10:8, where the apostles were empowered so they could do more.

The full verse is, of course, "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." Matthew Chapter 10, by the way, reflects an interesting "preview of coming attractions" for Jesus' 12 key followers. Their names were listed at the beginning of the chapter, a place and time where they were first called "disciples" (which means "learners"). And now they're being called "apostles" ("sent ones"), for they were about to be sent out into service for our Lord.

They were to heal, but they were not doctors. They were to restore lepers, which was unheard of at that time. Even now, leprosy can only be arrested, not cured! Incredibly they were to raise the dead as well, with no medical equipment or training. They had no electrical "paddles" that could jump-start the heart. And finally, they were to cast out demons, with no theological preparation or history of expertise in that area.

The apostles were not allowed to take anything with them. No money, no overnight bags, no extra clothing or shoes – nothing. They were to give up control of their lives and learn to trust in the Lord. Each one of us is being taught that very lesson - to TRUST in Him who loves us.

Notice they were sent to the Jewish people only (verses 5 & 6). This is interesting, because in our study in the Book of Acts, we found that at least one of these men (Simon Peter) would specifically be sent to non-Jews (Acts 10 & 11). God did not somehow change His mind – It is rather that God's purposes are not the same for all situations and people. It is not He who changes, but we must respond to His will in differing circumstances. It is you and I that need to change.

There are many excellent verses in Matthew 10, but our focus is on verse 8 and its context: "Freely you have received, freely give." And I am sure the apostles were listening with great intensity to those words of the Lord at precisely that moment, for they were just ordinary men who did not think they had anything to give.

This turn of events must have been ASTONISHING to them. SUDDENLY, they were to do things they had never done before. Things NO ONE could do (except Jesus Himself).

The evangelist Dennis Stinson has referred to the sudden onset in our lives of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as similar to the "download" (of a program) to a computer. In an instant of time, we can perform acts and think thoughts we never even dreamed about before, just because God so wills it for your life and mine.

I am also fascinated that Judas Iscariot, the one who was to betray Jesus (verse 4), was given the same gifts and abilities as the others. His betrayal would not be some sort of surprise, for Jesus "knew what was in man" (John 2:25). Judas was carefully selected like the others, but for different reasons. We learn from these verses in Matthew 10, that not all who exhibit the "gifts" (which includes teaching, prophesy, praying successfully for the sick, and so on) – not all who do these things are necessarily right with God.

All that we have, all that we are, whether it is "natural" or "supernatural" in nature, is a gift to us. "Freely you have received" applies to everyone, including those who are called and sent by our Lord Jesus. In an analogy to the modern world, we are very much like computers and can really do nothing until we are enabled by God.

I am surprised when I find what appears to be pride in the Church. There is simply no ground for it. We are to give the praise to God, and not substitute the accomplishments of any person in His place. When people compliment us for something we have done, we can be encouraged, and answer "Thank you," but all of us really need to understand that if anything good is said or done, it is a gift from God.

God knows everything. You and I know so little, and except the words and the actions come from Him and His will, we are like the "noisy gongs" of 1 Corinthians 13:1. Life is too short for "noisy gongs." We are to give the glory to God, who has given us – everything.

The question is, WHY are these gifts given to people like you and me? What are they for? (Because obviously, God does not need us at all). The answer is right here in this verse, for He not only said "freely you have received", but He also said "freely give." He is re-creating us and we are to become a people of faith in God; a people who reflect His love into the lives of those around us. A people that no longer takes, but gives to the needs of others.

We wonder "Why?" about a lot of things. The answer to "Why...?" is His grace. The answer is that He is increasing our faith. The answer to "Why...?" is also that He is filling us with His love.

Let's thank Him:

Father, we thank You, and worship You, and we praise Your Holy Name. We are hungry for more of You, and we see that Your direction for us is that we are to love one another. Let Your love become real in us, each one. Fill us, Lord. "Download" joy, peace, and love into us all; into Your people. Rescue us from selfishness and heal us, Lord. Heal our land, our Church, our people. Make us Yours, and let us reach out to those in need. In Jesus Name. Amen.