

A Call To The Ministry

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[0 : 00] If God calls you to be a missionary, don't stoop to be a king. Thus said the Methodist minister Jordan Grooms in the 1930s.

At a recent Twin Lakes conference I attended, I heard the American pastor Steve Lawson put it this way. God has called me to be a preacher of the gospel.

To become the President of the United States of America would be a huge step down. Many years ago I stood outside a hospital ward of the Royal here in Glasgow.

I was with the late Dr. Rachel Tate, a remarkable member of this congregation who had been a GP in the east end of Glasgow for her whole working life.

We had together been visiting an elderly lady called Flora Kennedy. Some of you may remember her. And while we had been with her, she had taken a turn.

[1 : 05] And so we'd been rushed out and told to wait in the corridor until she was better. Now both Rachel and myself were very concerned for Flora. I'll never forget the conversation that followed.

At that time I was desperately unhappy. There was conflict among the office bearers, funnily enough, about this building. And to use a good Scottish term, I was scannered and thinking about leaving the ministry.

At that very moment, standing in that hospital corridor, I felt so useless to help Flora. And so I turned to Rachel and I told Rachel how I was feeling.

And how I was so hurt in the ministry that I was thinking about leaving and doing something that perhaps could help sick and suffering people in the now. Rather than to promise them anything in the hereafter.

Well, Rachel, in a way that only she could, turn and look straight into my eyes. She hadn't really needed me to tell her anything.

[2 : 14] Because, again, in a way that only she knew, she had known exactly what I was thinking. In her own unique way, her wee face opened up in sympathy and understanding.

You know, Rachel had one of the kindest hearts and was one of the godliest Christians I've ever known. She had patiently listened to me. And then she spoke.

And her words spoken in a hospital corridor in the royal infirmary on that sweltering day when my sweaty ministerial shirt was sticking to my skin and my heart was broken.

And we didn't know whether Flora would live or whether we should die. Our fate ever seared into my memory. Bear in mind she had spent her whole working life as a GP in the east end of Glasgow, one of the areas in Scotland with the most profound health problems and the lowest life expectancy. She told me that though the practice of medicine could extend life for one year or for 10 years, what I was offering in the gospel, Lord's Day by Lord's Day, gives eternal life.

[3 : 23] And she told me to get a grip on perspective. That ministry is of infinite value because it provides what medicine, for all its great value to us, will not, does not, and cannot.

A gospel which proclaims forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ. On that swelterly hot day in a corridor outside a hospital ward in the royal infirmary, Rachel Tate reached into my heart and tree-oriented my perspective.

God spoke through her to this wounded healer and reminded me that there is no higher calling and no greater privilege to which a human being may be called than to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God said, well, I'm not. Well, since then I've had my wobbles, of course, but I've never forgotten, nor will I ever forget, Rachel's words. And I believe them from the bottom of my heart to be absolutely true.

Listen to my words carefully this evening as I challenge you to believe for yourself what Rachel Tate taught me that day and what Jordan Grooms and Steve Lawson taught me also.

[4 : 51] God has called me to be a preacher of the gospel, to become the president of the United States would be a huge step down. But there is no higher calling and no greater privilege to which a human being may be called than to be a minister of the gospel.

Listen to my words carefully this evening as I challenge you to hear the voice of God. Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

And then gingerly to step out in faith and respond, here I am. Send me.

Have you seriously ever considered God's call to the ministry of the gospel? All of us are called to the ministry of the gospel in different ways.

In Isaiah 6 verses 1 through 8, we read of Isaiah's call to be a preacher of the word. We're going to learn that God called Isaiah to be a proclaimer of his word and gospel, to proclaim his holiness, to proclaim our sinfulness, and to proclaim forgiveness for all who will accept him as Lord and Savior.

[6 : 12] This is the central role of the ministry of the gospel, that to which I'm calling you this evening. As we're going through this passage, please bear in mind the central theme of my insistence concerning a call to the ministry, that there is no higher calling and no greater privilege to which a human being may be called than to be a minister of the gospel.

If it's at all possible for you, if you knew her, picture Rachel Tate in your mind's eye. And hear what I say this evening through her mouth.

The first role of a gospel minister is to proclaim the holiness of God. It is to proclaim the holiness of God. Isaiah's vision begins with the majestic words. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up.

Now, King Uzziah was one of the most powerful kings to ever live in Judah. But as we read in the book of Chronicles and Kings, he was a deeply flawed individual who proved toward his life to be unfaithful to God.

This greatest of symbols of human power died. But it was in that very year, Isaiah received a vision of true power.

[7 : 38] For it was then he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. Compared to the power of the exalted Lord of heaven and earth, even that of the greatest of earthly kings is his nothing.

The minister of the gospel is not to be impressed by earthly power. Intimidated or frightened by it. Because he knows that the God he serves is absolute holiness and infinite strength.

And what is it that those angels who live in God's close presence sing to one another? Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.

The so-called Trezagon, the thrice holy, is the deafening song of the hosts of heaven. Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Yahweh sabot.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. And when this Lord spoke from his throne, the very ground on which the prophet stood shook, and the temple was filled with smoke.

[8 : 45] Such is the thick, oppressive presence of a holy God. Not a plaything, not a hobby, but great and awesome is the Lord in the fullness of his holiness and of his glory.

Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh. The first and primary calling to which God calls his ministers is to proclaim the glory and the splendor of the holiness of God.

that the Lord of hosts is altogether set apart, that as high as the heavens and above the earth, so far higher are God's ways than ours, and God's thoughts than ours.

The first and primary calling to which God calls his ministers is to proclaim his holiness from every word, from every text, and from every passage of his revealed word.

to proclaim the supremacy and superiority of God, three in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the holiness of his being, and the glory of his nature.

[9 : 53] The minister's greatest aim isn't that his listeners would be impressed with his elocution, charisma, and auditory, but that hearing the proclamation and declaration of the glory of God, they join together with the angels' trezagean, as together we praise and glorify the God of infinite, eternal, and unchangeable holiness.

Now, in John 12, 41, we learn something utterly fascinating. Namely, that this Lord, whom Isaiah saw seated on the throne, high and lifted up, was no less than the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ himself.

It was not the Father the angels saw and worshipped. It was not this Holy Spirit. It was God the Son they saw. It was the same Jesus who was filled with gut-wrenching compassion at the plight of the leper.

That's the Jesus Isaiah saw on the throne. The same Jesus who wept at the graveside of his friend Lazarus. That's the same Jesus to whom the angels sang their chorus of praise.

This is the glory here that Jesus set aside to be one of us and one with us. The so-called glory he had with the Father before the world began, to which he refers in John 17.

[11:20] It was this glory and love Christ emptied himself of. And so not only is the first and primary calling to which God calls his ministers the glory and splendor of his holiness, but we can refine that down.

That the chief role of the minister of the gospel is to proclaim the supremacy, the glory, and the holiness of Jesus Christ.

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Call or no call, does this not attract you to the office of the holy ministry? A life set apart to proclaim the splendor of the majesty of the holiness and glory of Jesus Christ.

When I was in the Free Church College, at the end of lectures, the professors would sometimes put their notes to one side and give us practical advice on how to conduct ourselves as ministers.

[12:38] I seem to mention him every week, but I'll mention him again. I clearly remember my mentor, Donald MacLeod, looking at us more seriously in church history one day and saying to us, gentlemen, above all other things, preach a big Christ to your people.

Preach a big Christ to your people. Too often, I'm sorry about this bottle, too often, modern preaching explains the text of a scripture perfectly, flawlessly, but falls short of the greatest of all the callings of a gospel minister, which is to preach a big Christ.

I would rather hear a sermon where the text of scripture was exegeted poorly, but Christ proclaimed it as glory, than where a text of scripture was exegeted perfectly.

A sermon delivered in lecture form straight to the mind, but my heart left as cold as stone because there's no big Christ there.

I'd rather hear a sermon from a man who was himself set on fire by the gloriness of the holiness of Christ, than a sermon from the greatest expositor on the planet whose delivery is that of a teacher in a classroom delivering a boring class on sentence structure, grammatical clauses.

[14:13] You see, I need a big Christ to sustain me in life and ministry, and the call to the ministry is that call to proclaim a big Christ, a big Christ on Christians so desperately need to meet for themselves, and we Christians so desperately need in order to survive.

the call to the holy ministry is a call to proclaim a big Christ, the holiness of the Lord seated on the throne, high and lifted up, heeding in our ears the voices of the angels, kadosh, kadosh, Yahweh saboat, hagios, hagios, hagios, kurios, saboat, holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.

There is no higher calling and no greater privilege than to be called to be a minister of this gospel and to preach the holiness and the bigness of Christ, to forget yourself and your own agenda, to lose yourself in the glory of the king.

The second function of the gospel minister is to proclaim the sinfulness of man, to proclaim the sinfulness of man. It was said of the Stoic Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius that he'd employed a slave whose only job was to walk beside him, continually whispering into his ear, Sire, thou art but a man, Sire, thou art but a man, man.

There is no greater way of humbling a man than to offer him a glimpse of the infinite holiness of Christ, no greater way of showing his sin to himself than to gaze into the spotless purity of Jesus Christ.

[16:07] With all Isaiah saw and heard, we read it, he cried out, woe is me, verse 5, for I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

The prophet, as he's been called to the office of the holy ministry, is struck not by self-confidence in his own abilities. He is primarily struck by his own sin and the sins of those he lives among.

He recognizes above all other things that he's the chief of sinners and the weight of his transgressions against the holiness of God drag him down. Supposing you'd stuck a computer in the face of this Old Testament prophet and told him of the great advances in technology which

would happen by today, you know, he wouldn't have heard a word you said. He at this present moment is struck dumb by how just dreadfully sinful he is. And it's this experience of the guilt of his own sinfulness which changes his life. It teaches him lessons at every level, not the least of which is this. The greatest problem facing us is the problem of the offense of our sins before a holy God. [17 : 38] The greatest issue facing mankind today isn't the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor is it even climate change. It is the problem that our sin is an infinitely serious offense against an infinitely holy God.

And it's not just what we do that's the problem. It's who we are on the inside. We sin because we're sinners, not the other way around.

I don't think you'd get away with it these days. It certainly wouldn't be a bestseller in any Christian bookstore. But the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a book called *The Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin*.

It is the gospel minister's duty to proclaim in the light of the holiness of God the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

For if that is not preached, there will be no gospel to proclaim. Much of modern evangelicalism is characterized by the I'm okay, you're okay mentality.

[18 : 44] But if I was okay, and if you're okay, then why did Jesus die on the cross? And so this office of the holy ministry includes something which mankind since the very beginning, but especially in our own day, finds repulsive and rebels against.

Call out sin and name it for what it is. To point to his exceeding sinfulness. To be God's whistleblower. Pointing out and warning against sin.

But it's only proclaimed for this reason. It points to our need for salvation and forgiveness. That it points to how we are dead in our transgressions and sins and in desperate need of the life-giving and grace-empowered gospel of Jesus Christ.

It takes courage to proclaim the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It is hard to go against the flow and blow the whistle on sin, especially when it's the sin of God's people that we're called to blow the whistle on and not that of the world outside.

For too long the preachers of the gospel have railed at the world for its sinfulness, but have conveniently forgotten to blow the whistle on the greed and the idolatry and the hypocrisy of church members.

[20 : 11] If God's calling you to be a minister of the gospel, to proclaim the greatest need of a lost humanity, forgiveness, forgiveness from our sin, then don't even think for one second about stepping down to become a president.

And then the third duty of the gospel minister is not only to preach the holiness of God, to preach the sinfulness of sin, but it's to preach the forgiveness of sin.

It's to proclaim the forgiveness of sin. There's something in verses six and seven that goes beyond anything else ever written in any of the languages of men. Then one of the said of him flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he'd taken with tongs from the altar.

And with it he touched my mouth and said, behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for. There is forgiveness of sin for Isaiah in that coal taken from the altar.

There is atonement and pardon in the sacrificial altar for the one who said of himself, I am a man of unclean lips. God took the prophet's offenses away.

[21 : 33] He burned them in the sacrificial altar. He washed Isaiah's lips and heart clean. There is forgiveness you promised. The forgiveness which Isaiah is then called upon to proclaim to every sinner.

That if he or she should accept the sacrifice offered on their behalf, they shall be forgiven of all their sins. That the offense between them and God shall be eternally removed and there shall be the greatest of all reconciliations.

this reference here in verse 6 to the altar, is this not highly evocative? For was it not the very same king of glory Isaiah saw on the throne in verse 1 who gave himself on a cross-shaped altar to take our sins away?

And is not the application of his blood to our sin-stained hearts? That which takes our guilt away? And so I, above all other things, yes, I guess even above the call to proclaim the holiness of God

and the call to proclaim the sinfulness of mankind, the greatest privilege of the gospel minister is to proclaim that there is forgiveness for all our sins available at the cross of Jesus.

That whatever a man or woman may have been, that however sinful or not sinful they may have been, there's forgiveness for them in Jesus Christ and there's eternal life in him.

[23 : 16] You call it what you will, forgiveness, salvation, pardon, redemption, but it's our duty and privilege as Christian ministers to offer it to anyone who will put their faith and trust in Jesus.

Jesus. The gospel call of the 18th century Scottish marrow men preachers was this.

Go and tell every creature under heaven, I have good news for you. Your duty and privilege as a minister of the gospel is to tell every man and every woman and every boy and every girl, I've got good news for you.

Jesus has died on the cross and if you believe in him, you shall have eternal life. Your duty and privilege is to stand in God's place and to extend forth God's invitation to extend your arms even as Christ extended his on the cross and to cry out so that everyone can hear you.

How great the gospel of our sovereign God where justice met the mercy of God's rod. God's love. As Evan prayed about last evening so inspiringly, you're standing in a long line stretching back into antiquity.

[24 : 37] Its numbers include Augustine and Athanasius, Martin Luther and John Calvin, John Knox and Sam Rutherford, John Wesley and George Whitefield, Thomas Chalmers and Charles Spurgeon, Martin Lloyd-Jones and Billy Graham.

And of course, last but not least, the apostles of Christ themselves such as Peter, Paul and John. The ecclesiastical authority of Peter does not rest in the Pope in Rome, but in every preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You will have royal blood in your veins and a royal message to proclaim the King's invitation to know him as Father, to begin a new life, a life that shall never end, full of grace, full of glory.

Surely, Dr. Rachel Tate spoke words of wisdom to me that day in a hospital corridor in the Royal Infirmary.

She said, Colin, remember this. The practice of medicine can extend life by one year or 10 years, but what you're offering gives eternal life.

[25 : 55] Get a grip on perspective, she said. The gospel you're offering is of infinite value. As a denomination, we've been praying now for some 14 months for 60 new ministry workers for the Free Church of Scotland.

We've been praying for 30 new churches to be planted by 2030. Now all that's left for me is to stand in God's place itself an awesome privilege.

And repeat his question from verse 8. Whom shall I send? Who will go for this? Bending in mind the consistent theme of tonight's study, that there is no higher calling and no greater privilege to which a human being may be called than to be a minister of the gospel.

Are there any here this evening who are willing to stand with me in that hospital corridor? And in view of all that has been said to make a vow, here I am, warts and all, send me.

Let us pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for Rachel Tate.

[27 : 28] We thank you that it wasn't just to me that she gave such encouragement and pointed us to Christ. It was to many others as well, through words of wisdom, but also through great practical service.

We long to see her when we go to be with you, O Lord. But we shall have done her of us disfavor if any of us should ever assume that the eternal life that is offered to us in the gospel is somehow of less worth than anything this world can offer.

We shall have done her the greatest of the services if we shall assume that serving Jesus is of less value than serving ourselves.

O Father, we pray that you give us the heart of Isaiah who perhaps fearfully and with great trepidation, empty of his own abilities with no particular self-confidence at all.

When he heard your voice saying, Whom shall we send and who will go for us? Raised his hand and said, Here I am. Send me.

[28 : 50] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.