

Lessons in Ministry

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 0 0] every prospective Free Church of Scotland minister must spend at least three years studying theology before he can be licensed to preach and ordained to the ministry.

In those years, as Stephen will tell you, they study the biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew, the theology of the Old Testament and the New Testament, practical theology, church history, and systematic theology. It's intense, but it's a very rewarding way to spend three years.

There's a sense in which the disciples of Jesus also spent three years of learning and preparation before they were licensed to preach and ordained to the ministry. Of course, they didn't have to go to Edinburgh to study, but rather they followed Jesus wherever he went. They learned their ministry lessons directly from him. They didn't divide their studies into different disciplines and didn't have to write essays or pass exams, but in a very real way, for these three years of the public ministry of Jesus, they were learning. After all, the word disciple means learner or student.

As disciples of Jesus, we all have much to learn, and ultimately, he, Jesus Christ, is not just our teacher through his word, but the entire subject matter of our studies. We don't learn about him from other things, but we learn about Jesus from Jesus. For as we'll later read in the Apostle Paul, in him, that's Jesus, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Now, Jesus had good reason to spend three years training these twelve men, for soon he'll be crucified and raised, and from then, from heaven by his Holy Spirit, he'll work through them to grow and establish the early Christian church throughout the entire world. Luke chapter 9, one of the longest chapters in the New Testament, is totally given over to ministry lessons Jesus is teaching his disciples.

[2 : 3 2] ministry lessons Jesus is teaching his disciples. Lessons they need to learn and understand if they are to lead the early church. We've seen Jesus sending them out on mission in the early part of this chapter, and then we've seen Jesus using them to distribute the miraculously produced bread and in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. And now we see from verses 37 through 50, in these four discrete but connected incidents, Jesus teaching them more lessons about what it means to serve him as his disciples after he has gone away. How to preach the word of the gospel. How to practice the works of the gospel.

So, let's read this passage in Luke chapter 9 from verse 37 through 50. This is on page 867 of these wonderful new pew Bibles that you have in front of you. You'll notice they have a QR code in the back. For older people, you don't have to worry too much about that. But for those who knew about QR codes, you can use your phone to access all the information sitting behind that QR code. Luke chapter 9 from verse 37.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child.

And behold, a spirit seizes him and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth and shatters him and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not. Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here. While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him.

But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And all were astonished at the majesty of God. But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, Let these words sink into your ears. The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men. But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

[5 : 22] An argument rose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, Whoever receives this child in my name receives me. And whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among all of you is the one who is great. John answered, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us. But Jesus said to him, Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit, our guide, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Each of these four stories has something to teach the disciples about gospel ministry. First, dependence, from verse 37 to the first part of verse 43, then reality, the second part of verse 43 to verse 45, then humility, from verse 46 to 48, and lastly, unity, from verse 49 to 50.

Now, none of us are apostles in the sense that these twelve were, but we are all called to serve Christ in different ways according to the gifts that he's given us. And so for us also, this passage provides pivotal lessons in ministry so that as we share the word of the gospel and practice the works of the gospel, we too may walk joyfully and faithfully in the footsteps of our Lord and experience his blessing also. So this isn't just for Stephen today. The first lesson from verse 37 to the first part of verse 43 is dependence, dependence. You know, I wonder if when Jesus and Peter and James and John came down from the Mount of Transfiguration and met the crowd at the foot of the mountain struggling with the sickness of a young boy, they'd wish they'd stayed up on top of the mountain after all. It is one thing to see the majesty of Christ on a mountain. It's another thing to see the misery of humanity in the valley.

However, down the mountain they come and are confronted by a man who cries out, teacher, rabbi, I beg you to look at my son. He is my only child. And behold, a spirit seizes him and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so he foams at the mouth and shatters him, will hardly leave him. The symptoms sound very much like some form of epilepsy. And yet before we conclude it was a merely natural epilepsy, we read it was a spirit who was seizing the boy. A spirit which in verse 42 Jesus calls unclean. So, Jesus comes down the mountain and the first thing he sees is the misery of a man and his son. Jesus isn't isolated from the sufferings of humanity. Rather, where there is human misery, wherever there is human misery, he is there, ready to minister his healing and restoring grace. The man goes on, I beg your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.

Remember, James and Peter and John had been with Jesus on the mountain, so there were nine disciples left at the foot of the mountain. And between them, these nine could not cast out the unclean spirit.

Jesus responds in verse 41, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Now, these words seem rather harsh, do they not? But Jesus is using them to make the disciples think of another episode in Jewish history where someone came down from a mountain and found a people in a mess. He's referring to how when Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, he found the people bowing down to worship a golden calf which they had set up in his absence. They thought they could make up their own rules as to how to express their faith in God. So, Jesus' words, O faithless and twisted generation, are designed to remind those listening of that tragic event at the foot of Mount Sinai where the Israelites thought that they could make up their own religion and they didn't really need the God who was at the top of the mountain.

[10 : 57] They can do faith without that God. They can rely upon their own intellect, their own craftsmanship to win through.

Well, Jesus shows them how wrong they were because having called the boy forward, he rebukes the unclean spirit and heals the boy. He does what the disciples could not.

Notice in verse 42, at the end of verse 42, notice the compassionate humanity of Jesus. For we read, he gave him back to his father.

Such a tender action. He gave the boy back to his dad. What the disciples could not do, Jesus did.

The lesson for them and the lesson for us is this. Without the strength of Jesus, we can do nothing meaningful in ministry.

[11 : 59] Unless we depend upon Jesus' strength to work through us, we will not pass first base in serving him. It's not our strength, abilities, and gifts which matter.

It's his. The great Thomas Boston once said, A man may preach like an angel, but be absolutely useless. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples quickly learned the lesson because we find them praying for the strength of God to fill them with courage, to preach the word of the gospel, and to practice the works of the gospel.

Jesus would later say to them, Without me, you can do nothing. And the apostle Paul would add to that by saying, I can do all things through him who gives me strength. The first ministry lesson Jesus teaches us in this passage is the importance of dependence upon him.

Samson, the Old Testament judge, was a formidable figure. Big, strong, and brawny. No one and nothing could stand in his way.

That is, as long as he didn't cut his hair. So he left his hair to grow long. But at the moment, his hair was cut. His strength left him, and he was just as weak as any other man.

[13 : 27] As long as his hair was long, he had supernatural strength from God. But cut his hair? And he was as weak as any of us.

It's a picture of the church without Christ. That without Christ's strength at work in us, and through us, and for us, we can do nothing of any real importance or meaning for him.

Our words for Christ will fall on deaf ears, and our works for Christ will produce no results at all. The text tells us in verse 43, that all those who witnessed the miracle of Jesus were astonished at the majesty of God.

Would that when Glasgow heard of the powerful words and works of the gospel in our church, they too would be astonished at the majesty of God.

Where does our strength come from so that what we do will be filled with spiritual power? It comes from Christ, and Christ alone.

[14 : 38] What should we do by way of application here? We should follow in the footsteps of the apostles, and devote ourselves to prayer as a church.

Prayer is the only means God has promised to respond to with power. This passage, with its ministry lesson of dependence upon Christ, calls upon us to pray for the heavenly Christ, to send his spirit, to empower our gospel words and works, so that we all, and the world around us, would be astonished at the majesty of God.

Dependence. That's the first lesson. The second, from the second part of verse 43 to verse 45, is reality. Reality.

Close your ears, Stephen. Many students entering or preparing for ministry have a rather rosy view of what ministry is going to be like. They think it will be like one success after another.

There'll never be any obstacles. There'll never be any conflicts. There'll never be any challenges. Historically, some entered the ministry thinking that it was a good way to get away from the troubles of the world.

[15 : 56] In these verses, Jesus introduces us to the reality of ministry. He says, The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.

There's nothing rosy about the ministry of Jesus. It wasn't all powerful miracles and powerful sermons. There was conflict.

There was suffering. And there was death. This was the reality for Jesus. This is the second time Jesus has prophesied his suffering.

The first is in verses 21 and 22. Whereas there, Jesus goes into greater detail about what that suffering will involve. Here he confines himself to saying, The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.

Now, among all those disciples present that day was Judas Iscariot, the one who would ultimately betray Jesus to the religious leaders.

[16 : 54] Did what Jesus say here strike his conscience? Had he already become disillusioned with the idea of Jesus as a suffering Messiah?

And had he already planned to do things different? Were the silver coins of the Sadducees burning a hole in his pocket? Because this will be the reality of ministry for Jesus.

And although it was hidden from them at the time, it will be the reality of ministry for the disciples, all of whom will be delivered into the hands of men and suffer for their faith in Jesus.

All of them. The first will be the Apostle James, who within just a few short months of this episode will be executed by the sword. But what strikes us as strange about this is that just previously, Peter, James, and John had seen Jesus transfigured into glory on top of that mountain.

And then they had witnessed his triumphant power over evil in the exorcism of that unclean spirit. But now this Jesus, the Jesus of glory, at whose works the people were astonished at the majesty of God, he's going to suffer.

[18 : 12] This is the reality of ministry. It is good to read the biographies of prominent Christians of the past. People like Isabel Kuhn, missionary to the Lisu tribes of China and Thailand.

Through her remarkable ministry, God strengthened the church among the Lisu peoples, and now up to 90% of Lisu people profess faith in Christ.

But her ministry among them wasn't all sweetness and light. Read her biography, and you'll find there everything from fleas to famine, persecution to prison.

The reality for Isabel Kuhn and many like her has proved far more to be in Jesus' model here in Luke 9 than perhaps they would have liked. Ministry does have its highs, but it also has its lows.

Jesus was on top of the Mount of Transfiguration, transfigured into glory itself, speaking with Moses and Elijah, but here he is now in the valley, dealing with the failure of his disciples.

[19 : 23] This will be the reality for the life of his disciples. Forewarned is forearmed. This is the second ministry lesson. Sometimes ministry hurts.

That's the reality. Third lesson from verse 46 to 48. Humility, humility. The scene moves on, and once again we find the disciples arguing among each other.

This time it's not about bread or fish, but about which of them is the greatest. Isn't that just so human? For all that they've been learning from Jesus about the nature of Messiahship, being service and suffering, the disciples are arguing among each other, which of us is the greatest?

Peter would have made his claim. I'm the spokesman. I've been on top of the mountain with Jesus. And John would have said, yes, Peter, but Jesus loves me the most.

Status and position. Historically, many young men went into the ministry because it promised them both. It was a path to becoming the greatest in a community.

[20 : 40] The bishop could have more power than the prince. Even in the evangelical ministry, it is easy to fall into a status and position mentality.

Who is the greatest minister? What a contrast from the words of Nicholas van Zinzendorf, an 18th century German minister.

He wrote these words, preach the gospel, die, be forgotten.

Preach the gospel, die, be forgotten. How different from the mindset of these argumentative disciples. Well, Jesus takes a child and places the child by his side and says, whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me, for he who is least among you is the one who is great.

Jesus causes this child to stand beside him as if to say, me and this child are one. Jesus did not stand beside Herod or the chief priest or the emperor of Rome.

[21 : 59] He stood beside a child who in the Israel of Jesus' day was of no societal value and was treated as little better than a slave. But it's with this child, the one who is the least, Jesus chooses to identify.

He had recently stood beside Moses and Elijah and heard the voice of God speaking to him on the Mount of Transfiguration. And now he says, whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.

He's revealing here the heart of God to us. In Psalm 138, verse 6, wonderful words, King David writes, Though the Lord is high, He regards the lowly, but the proud He knows from afar off.

Though the Lord is high, He regards the lowly. You know, to prove Jesus' divine nature, we often talk about Jesus doing the kind of things only God could do, like stilling a storm or feeding the 5,000 or being transfigured into glory.

Never is Jesus more like His Father than in this episode where He puts a child to His side and says, whoever receives this child in my name receives me.

[23 : 28] And then He says the most amazing thing. He says, For He who is least among all of you, He is the one who is great. The disciples are arguing as to which among them is the greatest.

And now Jesus says something to them which is perhaps the most important ministry lesson of them all. The path to greatness in the kingdom of God is not the path upward into status, but the path downward into service.

The path to greatness in the kingdom of God is not the path upward into honor, but the path downward into humility. The title minister literally means servant.

It is not a title designed to confer status, but to confirm service. The mark of true godliness in a disciple of Jesus is His or her humility.

And when I use that word godliness in the light of what Jesus says and does here, I mean that never is a disciple of Jesus more like God than when he or she is pursuing the downward movement into service and humility.

[24 : 43] Here we have then the third ministry lesson for Jesus' disciples. Humility. And then lastly, unity from verse 49 to 50.

Unity. Our passage concludes with a wee incident that may not seem very much to us, but if we took more note of it would remove many of the problems which infect our ministries today.

At the conclusion to this argument on which among them is the greatest, John says, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us.

Now, we don't know who this person was. Perhaps it's someone whom Jesus had previously healed or more probably someone who had sat under Jesus' teaching. His name is not mentioned, but what we do know is that he was casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

He wasn't a Jewish exorcist of whom we read in the book of Acts, but was someone who, independent of the band of the disciples, was working for Jesus in the name of Jesus.

[25 : 52] Now, John, speaking on behalf of the disciples, has taken offense. Surely, it should be them only who have the right to do mighty works of power in the name of Jesus.

Surely, they and they alone have been commissioned by Jesus. In some ways, John's objection seems fair enough. But is it really?

Is it really fair enough? Especially in the light of the fact that this unnamed person was doing his work in the name of Jesus.

Jesus answers, don't stop him, for the one who was not against you is for you. Jesus is here teaching us an important lesson in ministry.

He is firing a shot across the bow of any Christian group which thinks that it and it alone has the exclusive right to preach in the name of or work in the name of Jesus.

[26 : 50] He is warning us against that exclusive mindset into which we can so easily slip which thinks that we and we alone have it all right. And that only what we do is of any real importance in the work and growth of the kingdom of God.

It is a mindset that those of us brought up in a denomination can foster. That rather than when we hear of a good work being done in the name of Jesus by another denomination praising God for it, we pour scorn on it.

We need to remember that the church is growing exponentially in parts of the world where our denomination does not have a presence at all.

God is working through his people, through anyone who is preaching and teaching and working in the name of Jesus. He's not here so I can take his name in vain.

Just don't tell him I did it. A few months ago, Archie's car cut out at the entrance to the church here. Half of it in the lane and half of it sticking out onto Crow Road.

[28 : 08] We needed to move the car into the lane to stop blocking Crow Road. Well, there was only me and Archie in the lane and he had a very big car so try as hard as I might, I couldn't push it by myself.

There were three student girls talking to each other and laughing walking down Crow Road and they said, can we help? Well, between the four of us, me and three girls and Archie in the driver's seat trying to steer, we managed to push his Zephira to safety in this lane here.

We needed those three girls to put their shoulder to the plough for us. It's a very poor, poor illustration of the profound point made by Jesus.

But for the kingdom of God to grow in Scotland, for there to be a healthy gospel church in every community, we must embrace the work other Christians do and rejoice in their successes for Christ.

Unity is so important in ministry. I was very privileged to go through the Free Church College with some of the greatest teachers the Free Church ever had.

[29 : 23] Men like Professor Donald McLeod and Professor John L. Mackay. But if they were standing beside me this morning, they'd say the same thing. Our ultimate lessons in ministry come from Jesus himself.

And here in this passage, he's teaching us dependence, reality, humility, and unity. As a friend of mine is fond of saying, it's not rocket science, but they are lessons the disciples need to learn if, when Jesus works through them from heaven, they're going to lead and establish the early church.

knowledge. But before all these lessons for ministry must come, a far more basic lesson for life. What's of first importance for every man, woman, and child on planet earth is that we are right with God in the first place, that Jesus is our Lord and Savior.

You know, before Christians were ever called Christians, they were called followers of Jesus. Jesus. What's important, what's of first importance for us all here today is that we are followers of Jesus, the Jesus who gave himself on the cross to take away all our sins and to give us eternal life.

How can we become followers of Jesus today? We don't need to go to university. All we need to do is to believe and trust in him. Whoever we are, however great, however small, to follow Jesus is to have faith in Jesus.

[31 : 04] This is the first and greatest lesson of ministry.