

The Ministry of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] The ministry of the gospel. I have on my shelves many books about how to be a good minister.

! Every minister has. We all, I hope, want to be the best ministers we can possibly be for the glory of God and for the good of His people. There are two or three I prize more than the others, but towering above them all is the Bible itself.

I reckon I could throw out all my how to be a great minister books, and as long as I had my Bible, it would do me no real harm. In fact, I'd probably be a better man and minister for it. But if push came to shove and I had only one chapter of the whole Bible upon which to base my ministry, I'd have to choose 2 Corinthians 4.

In this chapter, the Apostle Paul opens his heart and he shares his philosophy and practice of ministry with the Christians in first century Corinth.

They're at risk of being blinded to the gospel by the extravagant gifting of false teachers. But Paul, rather than fighting fire with fire and emphasizing his own giftedness, shows that the source of true ministry isn't found in one's gifts, but in the sovereignty of God, the glory of Christ, and the sufferings, not skills, of Christ's servants.

[1 : 31] For Paul, there was no greater privilege in life than to be a servant of Christ. Well, in this momentous chapter, the Apostle Paul opens his heart and shares his philosophy of ministry under four headings.

But lest any of us should think that this chapter refers only to ministers, we remember that the word minister simply means servants.

And since we're all servants of Christ in one way or another, it applies to us all. All Christians must find the source of ministry where Paul found his, the sovereignty of God, the glory of Christ, and the sufferings, not skills, of Christ's servants.

So, Paul begins in verses 1 through 6 with a Christ-centered ministry, a Christ-centered ministry. Every word in this section is important, from the first, therefore, to the last, Christ.

Every sentence deserves a chapter in the How to Be a Great Minister manual. So, we therefore have to be highly selective and deal with the wood rather than the trees. However, what strikes us as we read these verses is Paul's incredibly high view of Christ.

[3 : 13] His ministry is about Jesus. It is a Christ-centered ministry. Many years ago, in the late 1980s, my cousin got married.

And I remember that wedding clearly for only one thing. The bride's grandmother was very eccentric and she demanded to be in every picture the photographer took.

So, he said, Can I have a picture of the bride and groom, please? At which point, she poked her head over the bride's shoulder. And then she said, Now, can I have a picture of the MacDonald family, only my family?

At which point, she cunningly disguised herself as a MacDonald. Now, these were years before airbrushing. So, no doubt, my cousin Brian and his wife Lillian don't have any granny-less wedding photographs.

The wedding wasn't about them. She made it about herself, this eccentric granny who made herself the star of the show. Paul, the servant of Christ, had no intention of making himself the star of the show.

[4 : 17] He did everything he could to place Christ at the center of his ministry. Notice with me from verse 4, How high his view of Christ.

The glory of Christ who was the image of God. We could delve deep into the majestic theology of this statement, and we will on Saturday evening. But see his high view of Christ.

Paul isn't writing about Christ as much as he is worshiping Christ. My mentor, Professor Donald MacLeod, once gave me and my fellow students an invaluable piece of advice, which I always give to younger ministers.

He said, Preach a big Christ. Gentlemen, preach a big Christ. He advised us to be wary about preaching on controversial issues, but to preach a big Christ.

But for the minister to use his mouth to preach a big Christ, surely means that his heart must also be filled with a big Christ. And this is what makes Paul a Christ-centered ministry.

[5 : 23] Christ was in his mouth because, first of all, Christ was in his heart. It was all about the glory of Christ. But then notice also from verse 5, that Paul, the servant of Christ, did everything he could to remove himself from the message he proclaimed.

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. What I remember about my cousin's wedding wasn't him and his bride, but her eccentric granny.

Now, whilst you never can or never should remove personality from a preacher, what the preacher should focus upon is not his own gifts, but upon the glories of Christ and the gospel.

The greatest way in which a minister can be a servant of the people is to point them to a far greater than himself, Jesus Christ. It should be his aim not to hear his sermons being praised, but to hear his Savior being praised.

The greatest compliment I ever heard being paid to a minister was to a previous minister of this congregation, the Reverend Ronald Mackay. At his funeral, it was said of him, Ronnie never stood in front of the word, he always stood behind it.

[6 : 49] And that's our aim, is it not? To preach a big Christ. Not a big minister. And then thirdly here, notice how the sovereignty of God is with a view to revealing Christ.

The sovereignty of God is with a view to revealing Christ. By nature, our eyes are closed to the glory of Jesus Christ. We see in him just another man if we see him at all.

We see in him no glory and no salvation. The God of this age, be that Satan of the world, blinds us to him. It takes the sovereign power of God to open our eyes and reveal Christ to us in all the glory of his gospel.

The sovereign power of God to do this is entirely as great as that which he exerted in the creation of the universe. For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shone on our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The sovereignty of God, so carefully talked of in our Reformed tradition, is no cold movement of chess pieces on an abstract theological board. It is a purposeful movement to reveal Christ.

[8 : 04] It always is. For just as Paul's ministry was centered on Christ, so also God's purposes for this world are centered on Christ. What an amazing display of power it is when God opens the eyes of a disbelieving man to see in the crucified Christ the glory of God and his own salvation.

Whenever anyone turns to Christ, it's as if the world is created anew within and Christ becomes precious to them. Just like Lillian, Lillian's eccentric granny got into every wedding photograph.

Jesus must be central to the ministry of every Christian minister. Jesus, the glory of God and the Savior of all who have believed. A Christless servant is a curse to its hearers.

And we too, as Christ's servants, live in rhythm with God's sovereign purpose to reveal Christ as we share the good news of the gospel in an unbelieving world that is no greater privilege in life than to be a herald of the glorious Christ.

So we have a Christ-centered ministry. Then from verse 7 to verse 12, we have a Christ-like ministry, a Christ-like ministry.

[9 : 35] Smooth, sophisticated, skillful. These sum up the public persona of the false teachers infecting the church in Corinth.

And to our shame, to our shame, the screens of much that passes for Christian television today. Armani suits, packed auditoria, your best life now, that's their message.

Health and wealth for all who believe and are faithful. Is this the pattern of a Christ-like ministry? Compare this type of ministry with that of the apostle Paul.

It would be interesting to read a forensic pathologist's report on the state of Paul's body. She would have concluded that during his life, Paul had suffered multiple traumatic injuries resulting in long-term chronic pain.

It would also be interesting to read a forensic psychiatrist's report on the state of Paul's mind. No doubt, while avoiding anachronisms, Paul experienced what today we might call anxiety.

[10 : 46] Perhaps even at times, depression. All these conditions, whether physical or mental, were brought about by his determination to pursue a Christ-like ministry. Surely he was telling the truth when in verse 7 he calls the gospel of the glory of Christ treasure.

It's treasure. But he was also telling the truth when he called himself and his fellow missionaries jars of clay. How clay-like the jars of those who, like Paul, follow in Christ's footsteps.

There are no teeth-whitened, Armani-suit-wearing, super-apostles among Christ's faithful ministers. Just jars of clay. So very frail.

So easily broken. He says of them, Afflicted in every way but not crushed. Perplexed but not driven to despair.

Persecuted but not forsaken. Struck down but not destroyed. All was being given over to death for Jesus' sake. Death is at work in us.

[11 : 54] The famous Puritan John Flavel, or is it Flavel, in his essay on a faithful evangelical ministry, wrote these words.

He said, A crucified Christ must be preached in a crucified style. A crucified Christ must be preached in a crucified style. by a crucified man.

It may not be smooth, sophisticated, and skillful, but the authentic proclamation of a Jesus who suffered for us can only be done by a follower of Christ who also suffers for his people.

The surpassing power of God only works and shines through weak vessels. In previous generations, perhaps men went into the ministry seeking status.

But, according to Paul, our expectations are to be tempered by those things we suffer. We shall carry in our bodies the death of Jesus. In seminary, they might teach you systematic theology in church history, but they can't teach you how to suffer well as a Christ-like minister of the gospel.

[13 : 14] I guess I've not met one seminary student who expects that in following in the footsteps of his master, death will be at work in him. But this is what it means, is it not?

To have a Christ-like ministry. The message is this, and this is not original to me. Everything I say that's any good has been borrowed from someone else.

Never trust a minister who walks without a limp. Never trust a minister who walks without a limp. There's a good reason for that. Unless death is at work in the life of the minister, the life of Christ cannot and will not shine through him.

It's the very fact that we are jars of clay, which means the surpassing power of God can work through us. To use the language of verse 12, it is as death is at work in him that life is at work in those to whom he ministers.

And Paul's going to come back to this theme in 2 Corinthians 12 where he talks of Christ's power being made perfect in his servant's weakness. For all their skills and gifts and charisma, I have learned not to trust ministers who aren't wounded healers, who exude professional competence, but not a pain-shaped character.

[14 : 40] Many ministers leave the ministry, no doubt the majority for good and proper reasons. The majority, I suspect, didn't realize how hard it would be.

Continually bitten by the sheep one is called to shepherd as painful. But through the pain of the Christ-like minister's death comes the joy of seeing God's surpassing power at work.

Very few how-to-be-a-great-minister manuals have a chapter on suffering, but the Bible does. 2 Corinthians 4, A crucified Christ must be preached in a crucified style by a crucified man.

Third, from verses 13 to 15, a Christ-exalting ministry, a Christ-exalting ministry. As we go through 2 Corinthians 4, I hope we're getting the message.

It's summed up in a phrase, a senior minister, I think it may have been Finley McKenzie who's with me this evening, drummed into my head when I first started in ministry and told me, it's not about you, stupid.

[15 : 58] It's not about you, stupid. Listen, Finley can get away with these things. It's not about you, stupid, was his way of reminding me that gospel ministry is not about me, but about Jesus.

It's all about the glory of Jesus, not one's self-image, not one's reputation. The more the ministry is about the minister, the less it is about Christ. And in these verses, Paul is reinforcing the message, it's not about you, stupid.

His chief desire was to exalt and promote Christ, not to exalt and promote himself. He's got no need to justify himself, knowing that, as he says in verse 14, he who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us also with Jesus.

Knowing that his eternal future is secure with Jesus, Paul is willing to endure all these sufferings, being misunderstood, being miscalled, being slandered, overworked, impoverished, overburdened, being exhausted, physically beaten and mentally tortured.

As long as Christ receives the glory, it's more than worth it. The apostles' desire for Christ's highest glory here is seen in two ways.

[17 : 17] In the first instance, Paul wants Christ to be exalted among those Christians God has called him to serve. God has called him to serve.

He writes, He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. And then verse 15, For it's all for your sake.

For your sake. He proclaims Christ and him crucified to the Corinthian Christians because he knows that it's the only way to heaven. Christ is the only way to salvation.

That a Christian is not saved by his or her obedience to the law of Moses or any other moral code, he or she shall be saved by faith in a glorious and gracious Christ.

That faith will be the transforming factor in his or her life. It will be through faith in Christ he or she will have hope in desperate times, strength in weak times, joy in gloomy times, and life in dying times.

[18 : 23] Although it may seem strange to say there are few greater joys in a minister's life than when he sees his people suffering well and growing in their love for Jesus even in tough times.

What a prospect it is for him to look forward to heaven where he and those to whom he has proclaimed Christ shall be eternally in the presence of their Lord.

But in the second instance in this little passage here, Paul wants Christ to be exalted among those who are at present not Christians.

Those who are at present not Christians. In verse 15, Paul writes, God is glorified when his grace in the glorious gospel of Christ is extended to more and more people.

When the gospel is preached and people believe in Jesus, God is glorified and Christ is exalted. One of the reasons we want to engage in mission as a church, one of the reasons that we wanted to renovate the building here is because there are areas of our city where there are very few Christians and the name of Christ is not known.

[19 : 47] We long to hear the praises of Christ from the mouths of those who are not yet Christians. So we engage in proclaiming the gospel to them, in sharing the good news of salvation through faith in Christ with them.

Christ is exalted in the extension of the kingdom of God in the world when those once enslaved to death are liberated until life and those once guilty and ashamed are forgiven of all their sins.

It's not about you, stupid. It's all about Jesus and all about the glory of his grace. To truly exercise a Christ-exalting ministry means the minister must do all things for the sake of others.

It's all for your sake, for the sake of the Christians he serves, for the sake of a lost world which desperately needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the glory of God.

Well, lastly, from verse 16 through verse 18, we have a Christ-empowered ministry, a Christ-centered ministry, a Christ-like ministry, a Christ-exalting ministry, and then a Christ-empowered ministry.

[21 : 03] Well, neither Jesus nor his apostolic servant Paul ever hid from us how difficult the ministry is. Jesus said to his disciples, if they hated me, they'll hate you also.

And Paul in this chapter has detailed some of the sufferings he endured on behalf of Christ. The ministry, in many ways, is a supernatural task, and therefore, the minister requires supernatural strength to sustain him because without spiritual petrol in his tank, there's no go in his ministry.

But how can, in the midst of difficulties, opposition, and spiritual blindness, how can the minister remain energized, vibrant, faithful, enthusiastic?

Well, in these last verses, Paul reveals the source of the strength for ministry, and surprise, surprise, it's none of him. It's all of Christ. He exercises a Christ-centered ministry, a Christ-like ministry, and a Christ-exalting ministry in the power of the risen Christ.

And this strength flows to him and through him in two ways. First of all, in the present, from day to day, Paul is being renewed.

[22 : 23] In the present, in verse 16, he writes, though our outward self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. In other words, that which we may see of Paul's life, his outward nature, is wasting away, or more literally, it is being destroyed by all that he is suffering on account of Christ.

But his inner life, that which we cannot see, was being renewed daily. As the hymn says, to added affliction, he addeth his mercy, to multiplied trials, his multiplied grace.

And Paul's saying here, the minister's inner life of communion with Christ is to be maintained by the same methods which apply to every Christian, by prayer, the word, and the sacraments.

I recently saw a survey of long-serving ministers asking how they maintain freshness in their ministries. The overriding answer was, read your Bible, pray every day.

Read your Bible, pray every day. Inward renewal through his word is how Christ empowers his servants for a faithful and fruitful ministry.

[23 : 39] But secondly here, Paul is strengthened by his hope for the future. By his hope for the future. In such beautiful words, really, Paul writes, for this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look to the things that are seen, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Just as faith counts the cost, so Paul makes calculations upon which he bases his ministry.

First, he compares the slight afflictions he now faces with the incompatible weight of glory which has been prepared for him. How can we possibly call all that Paul has suffered physically, mentally, and spiritually for the sake of Christ slight?

The only way we can do it is by contrasting it with the incomparable weight of glory being prepared for him. So, we might have a negative balance of 1,000 pounds in our bank, but that pales into insignificance when an elderly relative dies and leaves us 1 million pounds in their will.

1,000 pounds is a lot, but compared to a million, it's not much. In the same way, the troubles of this life may be severe, but not compared to the glories of that which Christ has readied for us in heaven.

[25 : 16] Is it not worth it? But the second calculation he makes is the comparison between the shortness of this life and the length of eternity, the shortness of this life and the length of eternity.

The length of time we live on this earth really is but a grain of sand compared to the vastness of a huge beach. We live as long as a butterfly compared to a Galapagos tortoise.

For just this moment of suffering, we're going to enjoy an eternity of peace. To wear a crown of thorns now is worth it if we know that forever we shall wear a crown of gold.

And again, is it not worth it? I know of no how-to book odd Christian ministry like 2 Corinthians 4.

It takes us to the heights and to the depths of what it means to be a servant of Christ, but more than anything else, it places Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, front and center of everything the minister is, does and says.

[26 : 26] Paul teaches us in the title of Jim Packer, that great Anglican theologian Jim Packer, his famous book, Weakness is the Way. Weakness is the Way.

True success in service isn't found in one's gifts but in long-term faithfulness to Jesus. Can there be any more rewarding a calling than proclaiming the glory of the grace of Christ?

Are there any here this evening who are sensing a call to full-time gospel ministry? Are there any young men whom God is raising to send out into the harvest field for Him?

Before you pick up any other book, read and re-read and pray through 2 Corinthians 4 because it's here in the trenches of Paul's ministry better than anyone else, anyone else, you will learn how to minister like the Master, Jesus Himself.