The Role of the Gospel Minister

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[0:00] Please turn with me to 2 Corinthians 4 and verse 5, page 1161. 2 Corinthians 4 and verse 5, for we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves, your servants, for Jesus' sake.

Have you ever had a fright? What was it that frightened you? Was it a spider in your bed? Was it a loud noise in the night?
Was it the sight of your face in the mirror in the morning after getting rid of that spider and being woken up by that loud noise? Let me tell you, I got a fright the other night when I looked at an article in the Christianity Today magazine which detailed the role of the average pastor in today's average church.
I could feel the hairs, what's left of them, in the back of my next stand-up when this article told me that the average pastor in today's average church fulfills up to 52 different roles.
From missionary to manager, from preacher to pastor, from leader to administrator, the role of the gospel minister is way more complicated and scary than I thought.
[1:29] Bring back research and development solid state chemistry for me any day. It really is far simpler. We've all got, I'm sure, our own ideas of what the role of a minister should be.

In fact, I reckon there are a few other professions in which other people have more influence upon the role and not the minister himself. In the years since I've been ordained as a minister, the role has been changing in some ways for the better, in other ways for the worse.
But the truth is, it's not the minister's privilege to determine his own role in the church. It's not a privilege either that belongs to the church. It most certainly does not belong to the media or to the world around us.
The Bible and the Bible alone has the final word on what the role of the gospel minister is. Over the years, I've accumulated many books on ministry, thousands of pages of mature experience and wisdom.
Let me tell you that if you placed all these books on one side of a set of scales, and you placed these words in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 5 on the other side of the set of scales, the words of 2 Corinthians 4 verse 5 would prove infinitely more weighty in determining the role of the gospel minister.
[2:52] Paul writes, These are deeply challenging words.

They're also deeply comforting words. They remind us that while gospel ministry may be difficult, it's not complicated. At heart, it consists of two elements, proclamation and service.
Being a preacher of Christ and being a servant of Christ's people. Both belong together in the role we call ministry. We don't want nor do we need preachers who are above their people.
We do not want nor do we need effect ministers who will not boldly proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ. Well, you'd be gathering, and rightly so, that these sermons on 2 Corinthians 4 are being delivered as much for my benefit as of anyone else.
But it's important that we recognize that I don't have the right, nor does anyone else, to dictate the role of a minister. Only God's word can do that.
[4:08] And God's word in this verse tells us that a gospel minister is both to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and to serve the people of Christ. First of all, he is to proclaim.

He is to proclaim. Paul writes, we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.
All the way through 1 and 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul has been dealing with the many different ways in which the church in Corinth are falling away from the truth as it is in Jesus. One such way is their fascination with what are called super apostles.

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These are highly gifted men. They have charismatic personalities. The kind of preachers who can hold you in the palm of their hand by the power of their rhetoric, logic, and skill.
It didn't matter what they talked about. You would crawl on your hands and knees to go and hear them. They were experts in the arts of rhetoric and auditory.
[5:17] Contrast these highly gifted, charismatic, Corinthian super apostles with the apostle Paul. This man who, according to himself and according to the Corinthians, this man whose speech and appearance are distinctly unimpressive.

People looked up with awe to these super apostles. People treated the apostle Paul like dirt. He even had to work part time to support his ministry.
Ah, but the Christians in Corinth are so easy to fool. So easily tricked by the appearance of charisma and spiritual power. So easily bewitched by the highly gifted auditory of these super apostles.
These super apostles are great orators. We might even dare to call them outstanding preachers. But the overall impression you're left with, having heard them perform, is how gifted they are.
You can't see the Christ they're supposed to be preaching because their personalities and their skills dominate. It was said at the funeral of the late Reverend Ronald Mackay, whose name seems to be cropping up a fair bit in this series of studies, that he never stood in front of the text of the Bible.
[6:38] He always stood behind it. Listening to him preaching, you left with the impression of the love and glory of Christ from the pages of Scripture.

Not the leadership, personality and gifts of the Reverend Ronald Mackay. Well, even I have to admit that Edinburgh Castle is a beautiful sight to behold when it's lit up at night.
Dominates the Edinburgh skyline and rightly so, tourists flock to it. But none of these tourists spend thousands of pounds on flights and accommodation to come and see the floodlights themselves. They want to see what the floodlights are illuminating, namely, the castle itself. And I have yet to hear any of these tourists standing up on Prince's Street, looking at the castle at night, saying to one another, gee honey, well these floodlights are great, ain't they?
No, they say. Edinburgh Castle is beautiful at night. The role of the gospel minister is not just to preach, but to preach Jesus Christ as Lord.
[7:57] Now the word preach, as used by Paul here, was the word originally used in the context of a herald delivering a message, the Keduks who proclaimed the news about a king's victory over his enemies.

It is the role of a minister to be a herald of the glory of the love of Jesus Christ and the triumph of his cross and resurrection. The gospel minister is not a negotiator discussing the terms by which we may be at peace with God.
He is a herald proclaiming with authority God's terms for our peace, that it's by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ we are forgiven and reconciled with God.
Not just that, it is the role of a gospel minister to do everything in his power to proclaim that message and no other message.
He is an unfaithful herald who is given a message to proclaim by his king, but adds to that message his own thoughts, or subtracts from that message those elements of it that he doesn't really like.
[9:07] Rather, his role is to be a floodlight, proclaiming the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. He will have successfully fulfilled his role if, having delivered his message, the minds and hearts of his listeners are fixed not on him, but on the king.

If his listeners leave saying to one another, gee, that herald has got a good voice, doesn't he? Then he's failed. He has succeeded in his role if they say, have you heard what our king has said?
See what a great victory our king has won. John the Baptist was an outstanding figure in biblical history. The crowds flocked to hear his prophetic and incisive preaching.
And yet when Jesus came on the scene, John pointed to him and said, Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world. And then he said about Jesus, He must increase and I must decrease.
John's greatest ambition was that people would make little of him, but much of Christ. That Christ would have the preeminence always.
[10:29] John the Baptist was a strong floodlight, illuminating the character and the work of Jesus. And I guess I'm asking for our discernment as Christians. I've heard many great preachers

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delivering sermons, which frankly bear the title, Super Apostle.

You weren't left with the deeply challenging presence of Christ, but with the appearance of the preacher's skill and knowledge. I've also heard many weak preachers who in their oratorical weakness exalt Christ and leave you with a deep impression of the glory of Christ.
It is a curious fact that the greatest historic Scottish revivals began under rather mediocre preaching. It wasn't the greatest preachers who experienced the demonstration of the Spirit's power.
It was just normal men and women. I'm not saying that we should aspire to be the most boring and appealing preachers and proclaimers of the Word of God we can possibly be.
No, we should sweat in pursuit of excellence so that our poor communication is not an obstacle to the message we proclaim. However, having said that, it is not our responsibility to stand in front of Christ in such a way as to say, look at me, but to stand behind Christ and preach in such a way as to say, look at Him.
[12:02] Our greatest aim is that people would not love and admire us, but that people would love and admire Jesus Christ. This driving, relentless purpose to decrease in order that Christ increases also informs not just the means of our communication, namely heralding or proclaiming, not just how we preach, drawing little attention to self but much to Christ, but also the content of our preaching.

The question every preacher must ask himself as he begins to study, to preach is this, how will this text lead people to understand Jesus Christ better?
How will it help them to live under Christ's lordship? By all means, he should use every technique at his disposal to work out the meaning of that biblical text, but if it doesn't lead to Christ, then for all his skill, he's failed.
If it doesn't lead to people saying, surely Jesus Christ is Lord, then he's failed. So when he's preaching from Genesis, he's ensuring that the message of the text is not a set of moral lessons, but the foundations of Christ's covenantal love for his people.
And he's preaching from 1 Samuel and the life of David. He's carefully pointing at every stage, not to the spiritual lessons that we can learn from David, but to the person and work of the Jesus whose life David is a type of.
[13:37] And he's preaching from Isaiah 53. And he's extolling the virtues of the suffering Savior. The ultimate message of these passages in the Old Testament is the proclamation of the person and work of Christ, that Christ, our covenant king, has triumphed over Satan, and that in his victory, we too, as his people, are victorious.

If our aim is not to preach ourselves, but to preach Jesus Christ as Lord, then every sermon must focus on what this text tells us about the lordship of Christ, about the person and work of Christ. That's what God's people need to hear. And hear it in such a way as to leave them saying, have you heard what our king has said and done?
See what a great victory King Jesus has won. How challenging that we should interpret Scripture this way and we should preach like this. How challenging that the greatest compliment anyone could ever make about a sermon is, that really helped me to see Jesus Christ as Lord.
Proclaim. That's the first. Secondly, serve. Serve. And ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake.
[15:11] There are 10,000 books out there on the topic of preaching. There are courses you can take in theological seminaries, which will help you to learn how to interpret the Bible and how to preach the Bible.

But there are far fewer books devoted to the topic of the minister as the servant of God's people. And I don't recall ever seeing, in any seminary syllabus, how to serve the church.
I've heard time and time again classes entitled, how to lead God's people, but never how to serve God's people. You see, when Paul talks about ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake, there are two Greek words he could have used for servant.
He chooses the one which is most commonly translated as slave. We're going to have ourselves as your slaves, for Jesus' sake.
And that's challenging. But the life of a minister is a life of voluntary slavery, that he is being ordained not to status, but to slavery. No one boasts of their status as a slave, so why should a minister boast in his status as a minister?

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[16:25] In Acts 14, we read these verses together. Paul and Barnabas were evangelizing in the city of Lystra. And the people of Lystra were so overtaken by the miraculous signs Barnabas and Paul were performing, and by the authoritative speech of Paul, that I take up the reading from verse 11.

They shouted in the Laconian language, the gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.
The priest of Zeus brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates, because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. That is some response. For the crowds to applaud to the extent that they confuse divinity with humanity, God with the preacher.
And the preacher says, what a compliment, didn't I do well? What was the reaction of Paul and Barnabas? We read, when they heard this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, saying, men, we are, why are you doing this?
We too are only men, human like you. The reaction of Paul and Barnabas was consternation and anger. They didn't take the response of the Lystraans as a compliment.
[17:43] Their egos were not enlarged by it. They didn't consider their own aggrandizement a success. Rather, with slave-like attitudes, they said to these people, we're only men like you.

We've come to Lystra to proclaim the good news about Jesus, not to draw attention to ourselves, so that people will worship us. There are times in Paul's letters where he begins by saying, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.
And I guess we'd all be happy to be known, wouldn't we, as servants of Jesus Christ. But here in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 5, the service goes deeper. We are not just to be servants of Christ, but servants of Christ's people, literally their slaves.
slaves do the menial work. Slaves lack the status of the free. Slaves are obligated to work on behalf of others, to seek the furtherance of others, for no personal reward.
The slave's master is the one who will benefit off the back of the slave's hard labor. The slave himself shall never be recognized. In the same way, it is the role of the gospel minister to be the slave of Christ's people.
[19:04] After all, the word minister means servant, and Paul takes it down a notch by here calling us slaves. If a man can be proud of his status as a minister, then he is a fool.

For what slave is proud of being a slave? I will never forget an incident I saw at a ministerial induction which seared this truth into my brain.
At the reception, there was a large queue waiting to enter the hall. The queue was made up of ordinary punters like me. It was raining, so everyone was getting wet.
I was in the line, and everyone was waiting to get in. A senior minister from that presbytery and his wife walked straight to the front of the queue, and they barged past everyone else, and they got into the hall ahead of us all.
I wasn't annoyed that he had done this or that I was left out in the rain. I was annoyed and ashamed that it was a senior minister who acted in this way. Ministers aren't VIPs, very important people.
[20:13] According to Paul, ministers are VUPs, very unimportant people. That man should have been standing at the back of the queue with his wife, patiently allowing others to enter before him.

It was a small gesture, but it told me so much about the man, and with the rain pouring down over my face, I quietly resolved that I should never do such a thing, that I should never stand on my status, but that I should always pursue the lowest place.
After all, is that not where our Lord and Master Jesus Christ intentionally placed himself? We read in Philippians 2, verse 4, verses following, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
Being a slave of Christ's people for Jesus' sake, as Paul says, means voluntarily, intentionally taking the lowest place like Jesus did.
How can we proclaim the message of a servant king, whilst at the same time lording it over God's people? Is it not better to proclaim both the words of the cross of Jesus Christ, and to proclaim by one's preferment of others the servant heart?
[21:35] Of Jesus Christ. There is no task or duty beneath the minister. No, not cleaning the toilets. No, not being treated like a doormat.

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You might ask what I learned in the States recently. Let me tell you the most powerful thing I learned. It was in the church in which I was taking services in Greenville, South Carolina.
The senior pastor there is a man called Carl Robbins. He's a big man in every way. Great preacher, godly husband, Carl cuts an impressive figure.
He, as do many other American Presbyterian pastors, preaches in a preaching robe. The first Sunday I was there, it was Carl who was preaching, and his sermon on Daniel 3 in the evening was both powerful and memorable.
As he was standing in the hall afterwards, waiting in his preaching robe, this tall, impressive man who had just preached with powerful authority, a group of young children came up behind him and began to tug his preaching robe.
[22:39] Pastor Carl! Pastor Carl! They shouted. At that time, he was speaking to one of his senior elders, a very important, influential, and wealthy man.

And I stood back and watched carefully to see what Carl's reaction would be to these children tugging his preaching robe and nagging him. Pastor Carl! Pastor Carl!
He politely said, excuse me, to his senior elder. And he turned to face these young children. And he smiled at them and reached into his pocket.
He crouched down so that he was at the same height as the children. He produced a sweet and said to the first child, Emily, this is for you. And then he produced another sweet and said to the second child, Grace, this is for you.
And so on until all the children had a sweet. I have never been so impressed by the stature of a minister as I was by Carl Robbins that day.
[23:47] He knew these children. He knew their names. They were dear to him. And at that moment in time, they were more important to him than anyone else in this world. And my mind instantly went to this verse in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 5.

We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. Oh, his pulpit authority impressed me.
But his servant heart impressed me even more. And I thought to myself, I want to be just like Carl Robbins. I can't really remember what he said about Daniel 3.
But let me tell you, I will never forget the way he turned, smiled, crouched down to the same level as the children and knowing all their names, gave them a sweetie.
I think I've said enough. My purpose is not to draw attention to anyone else other than Jesus Christ, the greatest of all, who voluntarily became the slave of all so that by his cross and resurrection we might live.
[24:53] I am scared by that list of 52 roles the average pastor in today's average church performs. Let me tell you, I am positively terrified of these two roles the gospel minister, of the gospel minister, Paul highlights here, proclamation and service or more accurately, slavery.

Let me tell you as we close that the two roles are deeply connected. Only the person who is fully living under the lordship of Jesus Christ will ever have the humility to call himself a slave of Christ's people.
The call to the ministry is not a call upward to status but downward to slavery. It is not a call sideways to passivity but a call forward to proclamation.
Are there any young men here this evening who will dare to take such a call to follow their master into the proclamation of the kingdom of the grace of Christ and into the slavery of the kingdom humility of Christ?
After all, who cares for the super apostle? No one. Rather as Christians, we must aspire to be humble servants of the Lord for in so doing he shall receive all the glory and all the honor and all the praise of our Christ-like lives.
[26:22] Let us pray. We draw near to you, O Lord, aware of how often as Christians we stand in our status rather than adopt the lowest place and serving one another like our lord and master Jesus Christ did, expect to be served by others.

Lord, we pray that you would make each one of us Christ-like in a latitude toward one another but also, O Lord, we pray that you would spur us on to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ.
We pray that even here in our congregation, in our fellowship, start a work in someone's heart to drive them not upward into the status of a minister but downward into the service of a minister.
We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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