



A MATCHLESS MINISTRY

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2 Corinthians 4:1-6
Fifth Message
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How can Christians make their ministries more meaningful and effective? Many of you don't even know you are in the ministry. You never joined a holy order; you have not taken vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience. But all Christians are called to be ministers. Throughout the centuries, however, the church has turned away from many of the vital principles that made it such a powerful and compelling force in its early years. Primary among those is this principle of the priesthood of all believers. A gradual transfer of responsibility from ordinary believers to what became known as the "clergy," a term derived from the Latin word *clericus*, or priest, occurred. The Scriptural concept that every believer is a priest before God was lost, and a special group of super-Christians emerged who were looked to for practically everything that had to be done in the church.

When ministry is left solely to the professionals, however, there is nothing left for believers to do other than come to church and listen, and bring others with them. As a result, Christianity became a spectator sport, like football, which someone has defined as twenty-two men lined up in a field, desperately in need of rest, observed by fifty thousand people sitting in the stands, desperately in need of exercise!

Let me state this vital truth again: every Christian is called to be a minister! Jesus is our example here. David Roper writes: "Jesus was a layman, not a clergyman. Preaching was not his profession; he wasn't paid to do it. In fact, preaching wasn't a profession then. Jesus was a carpenter. He didn't even come from Levi, the clerical tribe; he was from the tribe of Judah. But he set the pace for us in terms of ministry. He said, 'I came not be ministered to, but to minister, and to give my life as a ransom for many.'"

So Jesus is our model for ministry. Two things emerged from his life, and also from the life of the apostle Paul, around which everything else revolved: they were with people, and they taught them. Those were their primary tasks. They befriended others and imparted truth. Ministering effectively, then, involves growing in those two areas: building relationships and understanding and communicating the Scriptures.

We pick up Paul's word today in our studies in the new covenant, from the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians. In defending his apostleship to these believers, Paul

helps us understand what a new covenant ministry looks like. In a nutshell, what he has been saying is, "I served you. I loved you. I lived out the fragrance of Christ among you. I preached the gospel to you. And look at what happened. Your lives were changed." Paul says that is our ministry, too. By teaching the word we get people to look at Jesus. As they see his face and as they come to know him, love him, fellowship with him and enjoy his presence, their lives are changed, almost unconsciously. They begin to reflect the character of God himself. Christian ministry, therefore, is teaching people the secret of character transformation. We have the ministry of imparting beauty to people's lives.

That is why Paul begins chapter 4 with the words:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, (2 Cor 4:1, NASB)

What is this "ministry" he is referring to? It is the ministry of imparting to people these secrets of life. It is the ministry of teaching the Scriptures in a way that people come face to face with Jesus, get to know him, enjoy his presence and reflect his character. Since we have this ministry, says Paul, "we do not lose heart." This is an odd phrase, one that does not occur very often in the New Testament or in secular writings of the time. Its etymology suggests something like "bad out." It is referring to weariness, becoming spiritually tired—"burn out," we would call it today. Paul is saying, since we have this kind of ministry we do not burn out; we don't quit or run away; we hang in there.

Many of you would admit you are burned out. You are tired. You have been used and abused. You are weary of being taken advantage of and hurt. Paul understands those feelings. He certainly knew how it felt to be discouraged and lonely. Nevertheless, he says, having this kind of ministry, we don't burn out. The reason we tire and grow weary is because we lose perspective on what our ministry is. We start to think that ministry is doing a lot of things for God, instead of being an instrument of God at work, imparting to people the secrets of life. That is what is important. Remember that the basis for this ministry that Paul received is the new covenant, the new arrangement for living which God has provided in Christ, drawing upon the resources of the indwelling Spirit.

Paul continues (verse 2):

but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, (4:2a)

That word “craftiness” comes from the two root words, “all” and “work.” Literally, what it means is, “to do all kinds of work, capable of anything.” This term took on a negative connotation, and, taken in that context, it literally means to do anything to get ahead, to use all of your abilities and persuasive powers negatively to “con” someone. Paul is saying, we don’t con people; we are not religious hucksters. We don’t use psychological gimmicks, pressure tactics, emotional pleas, heavy-handed demands, high-powered promotional campaigns, self-advertising posters and handouts and a continual emphasis upon numbers as an indicator of success. There is, of course, a legitimate use of publicity for informational purposes, but promotion is something else again. Jesus warned, “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt 23:12).

When we live a new covenant lifestyle we don’t need to deceive people; we don’t need to try and become something we are not. There is a great deal of dishonesty in Christian service and ministry. We see this everywhere, from churches which give candy to kids if they will get on their busses and come to church, to preachers who obtain phony degrees, to missionaries who feel pressured to make up or embellish stories for their newsletters in order to raise financial support.

Sometimes this takes the form of not being completely honest and real with people. We think we can’t have an influence until we are perfect, so we fake it and put up a front, because we are afraid if people see us as we really are they will reject us and we won’t have much authority in their lives. But that’s not true. It is tempting for people in leadership to give the impression that they have it all together, but they don’t. If people knew anything about those in leadership, they know we’re far from perfect. I have found that my admission of weaknesses doesn’t put people off. In fact, it makes us more accessible and real, because people learn we’re just like them; we have the same struggles. Paul says in a new covenant ministry we are transparent and honest with others.

And secondly, we don’t distort the word of God. We don’t misappropriate Scripture, taking it out of context to make a particular point. Some people pick out a few isolated passages from the Bible that seem to bolster what they want to say. They preach that God wants them to be filthy rich, the so-called prosperity gospel, as a cover-up for their own greed. Others distort the teaching concerning a man’s headship and leadership in the home. They don’t understand Biblical authority, and they use the passages on headship to selfishly get their own way, to buy their own toys, to use their leisure time for themselves rather than minister to their wives. Paul says he didn’t do that. He didn’t distort the truth

to feather his own nest or further his own agenda.

On the contrary, he continues,

but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. (4:2b)

We manifest the truth, says the apostle, we set it forth plainly. That is why we practice expository, not topical preaching, here on Sunday mornings. Topical preaching can distort the Scripture. John Stott, the great English church man, said he preaches a topical sermon about once every five years, and then he immediately repents! Our job as preachers is to repeat what the apostles and prophets have said. I don’t have any wisdom of my own about life. I don’t know how to help people face their fear of death or depression, their feelings of inadequacy, or heal their marriages. But God does. And through the apostles he has given us wisdom from above. So our job is simply to take the Scriptures and say again what the apostles have said. That is what preaching is all about.

My responsibility as a preacher of the gospel, one who announces the good news, is simply to repeat what God has said; to study the text, come to an understanding of what it means, and relate that to you in a manner that is clear and relevant, showing you the significance of the passage and its meaning in your life. That is the basis of all ministry, not just preaching. All ministry is simply loving people and imparting truth. And everyone can have this exciting ministry. So Paul says, we don’t play games with people. We don’t manipulate them or distort the truth. We just let the scriptures speak.

In doing this, Paul says, “we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience.” Everyone’s conscience is alerted. Did you know that conscience instinctively recognizes truth when it is presented? Truth bypasses the mind and emotions and goes straight to the conscience, and the conscience validates reality. It tells us whether something is real or not. We all have experienced that. Some things have the ring of truth about them.

David Roper shared a story once that clearly illustrates this truth. A man was called to testify at a hearing on whether to change a state law that prohibited so called “adult establishments” from operating within a certain distance from a school. This man, who was a Christian, was invited to testify at the hearing because he had spoken out on similar issues before. During his testimony, the attorney for the man who wanted to open the establishment said, “Sir, you know that if my client doesn’t build this building, somebody else will. It’s just a question of time.” The Christian reached into his pocket and took out a New Testament and started reading, from Luke 17: *“It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his*

neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble." When he had finished reading, he glanced at the man who was seeking the license, and he had turned as white as a sheet. That is the impact of truth. He didn't have to embellish it. He didn't comment on it. He just read it. I have seen that happen over and over. When you encounter truth, the heart says, "That's right!"

Pascal said, "The heart has reasons that reason does not have." Certain things go right past any defense and attack the heart, and truth is one of them. That is why we don't have to defend truth. We don't have to defend the Bible. Charles Spurgeon used to say that defending the Bible is like defending a lion. You don't have to defend a lion. Just turn it loose and it will defend itself.

David Roper says, "Truth sets up a sympathetic vibration in the soul. When we speak truth, the conscience resonates with it." That is why we must never harass people. Though we must contend for the faith we must never be contentious. The battle is fought not in the mind, but in the heart. Remember Paul's word to Timothy, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim 2:23-26).

People are victims of the enemy. They will not become Christians by pinning them against the wall intellectually. Paul says, simply tell people about the Savior. Tell them about the secrets of life, the truth as it is in Jesus. That has a way of hitting people dead center. They may reject it, but they know it's true.

This raises the question, If proclaiming the truth has such power, why is it that some don't believe? I am sure many of us have had the experience of sharing the gospel with someone and had little or no response. It didn't penetrate, or seem to have any power at all. Why is that? Here is what the apostle says about that.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (4:3-4)

Paul is not saying that the "god of this world" has blinded the minds of everyone so that they cannot see. Rather, the "god of this world" has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that is, those who have decided not to believe, who have, at least for the time being, hardened their hearts to the gospel and are resistant to be-

lieve. But in refusing to trust anyone but themselves they are playing right into Satan's hands. He cultivates the delusion that we can handle life on our own, without any help. His desire is to keep men and women from seeing the death and condemnation that awaits the end of the fading glory of living life by our own resources. Paul has already said earlier that whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Whenever anyone says, "Lord Jesus, help me," or, "God, reveal yourself to me, I want to know you," then the veil is taken away and they can begin to see the truth. So this blindness that Paul speaks of is not necessarily permanent.

How do we get people who are doing this to change their minds? Paul explains in the verse that follows:

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. (4:5)

Our job as believers is to keep announcing that Jesus is Lord. Paul is not referring to "professional" preaching here. The word for "preach" comes from a Greek noun for the "town crier," the person who went through the streets, announcing the latest word from the emperor. That is what we are, town criers who are here to announce the good news that the King has spoken! The best way to do this is not by shouting at the top of your lungs at the market place. It can be done quietly, over coffee with your neighbor, at your workbench, in your office, in a locker room or on a baseball field. It can be done at any time or any place. It is the simple announcement of the good news that Jesus is Lord. He is King. He is sovereign. All the events that occur in the world today take place because he has permitted them or brought them into being. He is in charge. The need of human hearts everywhere is to see that he is Lord. It is not a question of whether we will bow to him; it is only a question of when. Will we do it now, or then?

Finally, Paul gives the reason for why he preaches. Verse 6:

For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (4:6)

The apostle does all of this because he knows that it works. It worked in him when he was living in utter, absolute darkness. He was a "hit man" for the religious establishment in Jerusalem, on his way up to Damascus to imprison and murder Christians. And he was angry. The Scripture says he was breathing out threatening words. He hated Christians. And he hated Christ and everything he stood for. But the Lord stopped him in his tracks. Paul saw a blinding light, and his response was, "Who are you, Lord?" As David Roper put it, "He didn't understand fully, but he knew that this was Someone who had come to take over." From that point on his life changed. He saw who Jesus was. Before that

he thought of Jesus as a crazy Palestinian street preacher with no credentials to preach. But suddenly he saw him as the risen God. That incident changed his whole life. Yes, Paul knew about dispelling darkness.

The apostle says the conversion process is just like the original creation. Then, everything was dark, but God said, "Let there be light," and the light shone. Darkness had reigned in Paul's heart, which was black and filled with evil motives and murderous thoughts, and he couldn't see. Then God said, "Let there be light." The light shone into the darkness of his deluded heart, and he saw that Jesus was Lord. Paul is implying that if this worked in him, it can work in anyone.

So why do we keep this good news to ourselves? One reason we don't proclaim it is that we are afraid of people's reactions to it. We don't know what to say, and we are afraid they will reject us. But the same God who changed our lives is adequate to change the lives of others.

People are much more interested in talking about spiritual things than we think. Ask them! Ask them, "Do you have any interest in spiritual things?" And then listen! When you have earned the right to be heard through your listening ear and servant's heart, you can announce to them the good news that Jesus is Lord. We all need a lord, someone to take the pieces of our lives, put them back together, make sense out of them and give us the power to be the kind of people we long to be.

If you don't know that truth, let me tell that you Jesus is Lord. And the good news is, he isn't mad! He is not put off by all your sin and rebellion. He isn't angry with you. He just keeps reaching out to you as he did to the apostle Paul. He wants to speak a word into the darkness of your life, to say to you what he has said to so many others who are sitting here this morning, "Let there be light." I pray that today you will open your heart to this great proclamation by the apostle, that Jesus *"is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."*

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