

The Christian Ministry

Ephesians 3:7-8

Introduction

In this section where Paul is describing the “mystery” God has revealed, in a quick aside, Paul gives us a wonderful picture of his ministry to which he has devoted his life and for which one day he would give his life. This message is relevant to us all, for we are all ministers. The Greek word used *δουλος* means servant, and we are all called to be servants, to witness to Christ and to know the resources mentioned here. But will speak especially in light of “full time ministry” – given whole life (and therefore nowadays dependent on the church for maintenance). That was the immediate and original context of these verses.

Occasionally right to speak of Christian ministry in specialized sense. There is a place to magnify one’s office – but not oneself (Romans 11:13). Considering this subject can help to remove many misunderstandings about the ministry, and cause people to think about it and their own relationship to it. The ministry is very little understood by people outside, and sometimes inside, the church. It has been debased by those who think that it is just another profession - something you go in for, because it suits your interests and will give you the most satisfaction (just like others may go in for accountancy or nursing or school teaching). Others see the minister as a kind of social welfare officer – the head of a social services organization with a bit of religion thrown in. Some people thinks the minister only works one day a week, giving out harmless platitudes twice on a Sunday and then endless cups of tea and small talk with old ladies the rest of the week.

Because of such misunderstanding and such travesty, the conception of the ministry has been debased and counts so little. There may be men answering such descriptions, but we need to distinguish such falsehoods and counterfeits to get true picture.

A man, saved by God, with the hand of God on Him, called, gifted, sent as a herald and ambassador, preaching the everlasting Gospel to men and women without hope and without God. Divine calling with divine task.

Estimate of his person

Who is this minister? What is this sort of Gospel? Paul describes himself: **Less than the least of God’s people** (Ephesians 3:8) or “saints”. *ελαχιστοτερος* unique word coined by Paul. Comparative superlative – little, less, least – and now “less than the least”. C.f. **The least of the apostles** (1 Corinthians 15:9), **Sinners, of whom I am worst** (1 Timothy 1:15), **Wretched man** (Romans 7:26). Particular reason in Paul’s case – he had such an appalling record, a vicious persecutor who blasphemed the Lord, and sent Christians to prison and death. Not just indifferent but hostile to the Gospel. He had blood on his hands – e.g. Stephen.

But this statement is true of every servant of the Gospel, and indeed every Christian. May not have been a persecutor, but deeply aware of unworthiness. Know the truth about ourselves, that our admirers do not know. When a man looks honestly into a looking glass, and sees himself as he really is, the only thing he can do is take the lowest seat in the lowest room in his heart of hearts. True of all men of God down the ages. Abraham, David, Job, Peter, Paul. Luther said he would prefer to dig or do anything if he had his time over again and could chose his calling. John Knox, at 42, had such a sense of unworthiness and awful responsibility that only with difficulty could he be persuaded to enter the pulpit.

Such a contrast with some modern preachers, bowing on the platforms, brimming over with self-assurance, full of themselves and their cleverness and self-importance. People who do not know themselves and the grace of God in their lives do not understand “less than the least of all the saints”. Or else they feel this is an exaggeration. But men who have seen the Lord, and know themselves, can stand in Paul’s shoes without difficulty. Amazed at God’s grace and His dealings with him. Amazed that God would stoop to save him from the deep pit he was in, and called him into His service. It stirs him up to gratitude, earnestness and hard work and high endeavour.

And the only security of a man’s ministry is to retain sense of unworthiness and at the same time amazement at God’s grace. And sheer privilege, honour and dignity of serving God. The tragedy is when men change over the years, and yield to various temptations, their position goes to their head. Flattery has ruined them. C.f. Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:15ff) who was marvellously helped till he became strong. When he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction.

Frazer of Tain has two sentences framed in his vestry so that he saw them each time he went into the pulpit. One said: “No one can bear witness to himself and to Christ at the same time”, and the other said: “No one can give at the same time the impression that he is clever, and that Christ is mighty to save”. Luther said “I fear the great pope self more than I fear the Pope of Rome himself, and all his cardinals.”

#### Description of power which energized his ministry

Though “less than the least” of all God’s people, he became minister or servant of the Gospel **by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.... This grace was given me... to preach** (Ephesians 3:7,8). N.B. His chief work was described as to preach, to be the herald of good news, God’s spokesman, God’s ambassador through whom He addresses men. The ministry of the preacher is crucial part of God’s strategy. The means whereby He wins men to His Son and builds them up in their faith. The minister is not called to be an administrator, social worker, marriage guidance counsellor or youth worker. But he is called to preach.

Paul says **I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher** (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11; 4:17; Titus 1:3). When coming to the end of his life he says to his successor Timothy **Preach the word** (2 Timothy 4:2). Wherever he went on his missionary journeys he was constantly engaged in preaching. **By the foolishness of the message preached God saves those who believe** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

To a man truly called, it is not a chore or bore to preach. It is his intense delight. George Whitefield used to call his pulpit his throne. When preaching to thousands in the open air he was happier than if he assumed royal purple. While William Carey worked in India, his son Felix became ambassador to the king of Burma, which many regarded as great office. Carey said “Felix has drivelled [writing unclear] into an ambassador”. What some highly regarded, seemed as nothing compared with being an ambassador for Christ and preaching for Him. “The highest, greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can be called”.

Philip Henry on his Ordination Day said “I did this day receive as much honour and work as ever I shall know what to do with”. The Puritans recognized the high calling and great responsibility of the ministry. Their ordinations involved days of fasting, praying and laying on of hands - not sticky buns and jokes.

But how can this job be done? Not to please men, but to please God and be effective for Him. Answer – Gift of God’s grace ... effective working of His power .... This grace was given. “Less than the least” of all God’s people, called to most responsible and glorious work. How? Grace... power... Given. Grace and power, saving and transforming the blasphemer and persecutor. Now made him ambassador and preacher. Called, equipped him with gifts, understanding of the truth, power to speak and ability to teach. All this is given by God. Helpless in and of himself. No man can preach in spiritually effective way in his own power. May be able to talk and entertain and spin words and tell a story – but that is not preaching. Effectual preaching is rooted in grace, power and what is given. **A demonstration of the Spirit’s power** (1 Corinthians 2:4). **To this end I labour, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me** (Colossians 1:29).

True preaching is a thrilling experience of God’s mighty power working in and through us. The preacher works out what the Holy Spirit works in. Perfect blending of divine and human in service of God. Need for this grace throughout life. Few realize that man in ministry is just flesh and blood like everyone else. Not spiritual giant who knows nothing of temptation and far above all failure. Many pressures, temptation to whine, shine and recline, professionalism, want of patience, pride, tempted to cynicism, jealousy and discouragement, always tempted to leave first love, tempted to neglect his devotional life. No one is in greater spiritual danger than the one in the pulpit. The congregation can make many slips – but he cannot afford to make one. Others can say “I had a bad day, and fell into bad temptation, I’ll leave others to pray tonight.” The minister may have had an even worse day, fallen into even worse temptation, but he dare not leave it to others. Always expected to be on top form. Though he is just a poor needy sinner, a man of like passions, in same class as all those he ministers to. Many in congregation do not realize the pastor needs pastoral care just as much as they do.

If anyone needs to know about grace and power, it’s the man in the pulpit. **We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us** (2 Corinthians 4:7). Andrew Bonar’s secret “For 40 years there has not been a day when I have not had access to the mercy seat.”

Subject of his preaching

“Less than the least” of all saints... called to highest and greatest task and calling... to preach and be a herald. His message? **The unsearchable riches of Christ.** Sublime statement. Heart and core of preaching. Test of all preaching – not moral uplift, play game, act as court chaplain, or vague commentaries on current events, or advice on government’s next move. But Christ’s unsearchable riches. Modern versions have ransacked dictionary to express Paul’s words – untraceable riches, boundless wealth, incalculable riches, endless treasures. In Christ is sufficiency and boundless treasury – seen but not measured, enjoyed but never exhausted. We could live for all eternity and still not know half of what there is in Christ.

Against background of degradation, shame and curse and judgement on sin – the God Man, the One in whom all fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, death for sins, perfect atonement, glorious resurrection, alive forever more, conqueror of great enemy death, head of the church, Lord of the universe, ruling all in the interests of His people, indwelling by the Holy Spirit, never failing presence, gifts and graces, compassion, guidance, infinite power and sympathy, coming again in power and great glory, bringing in new heavens and earth. In Christ Jesus there is boundless provision – paying debts, transforming character, sustaining us in trials, giving peace amid calamities, watching over us in hour of death, bringing us safely to glory.

Complete in Him. Table is as loaded as ever. Keeps open house day and night. Enter one room of great treasury, leads to another, and another... always a further inner room. Fountain which never runs dry. After 50 years in the ministry, still scratching the surface. He invites us to come empty handed, sick and helpless, just as we are. Draw from His fullness daily. All we want is here, ours for nothing, ours for asking. **All things are yours, and you are of Christ. And Christ is of God** (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

*“Jesus my all in all art thou.  
My rest in toil, mine ease in pain.  
The medicine of my broken heart.  
In war my peace, in loss my gain,  
My smile beneath the tyrant’s frown.  
In shame my glory and my crown.”*  
Charles Wesley

### Conclusion

The minister, the “less than the least” of all God’s people, nothing in himself. Called to preach. Equipped by grace and power. The subject of his preaching is not religion, not morality, not politics, but Christ

Do you know Christ? What is His place in your heart and life? Pardon, peace of conscience, hope of heaven, all hinge on your response. Have you felt God’s hand on your life? Is He at work in your soul? Is your dominant desire to know His unsearchable riches? Or are you content to be a spiritual pauper?

Christian ministers – how do you view them? Pray for an abundant supply of real men of God, not time-servers mouthing empty platitudes, or sycophants. Pray that they will be kept sound in doctrine and holy in life, that they will not fail the immortal

souls committed to their charge. Even remember they are common earthenware jars – their only hope is the grace and power which is of God.