

# The Ministry and the Minister.

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It is on my mind to dwell a little upon the ministry of Christ as it is presented to us in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. The manner of presentation in Corinthians differs greatly from that in Ephesians. In the latter epistle we have the mystery unfolded of Christ and the church, and our heavenly blessings in association with Christ risen. In connection with this, ministry is found, as the gracious provision of the Head for the need of His members below. It comes out, as it were, as part of a circle of teaching concerning the church, its blessings, and endowments.

But we observe a different hue in Corinthians. The apostle is here seeking the full spiritual restoration of his children in the faith. They had erred. Satan had got in. Their hearts had been estranged from the Lord, and from the man who had been so greatly used to their blessing. Their ways and words had forced the apostle to speak of himself and his ministry — this to a larger extent than he would have wished to have done. Consequently ministry in this epistle has largely an experimental character. The deep feelings and emotions of the wounded servant are to be observed throughout. To simplify the matter, I would just observe that the subject is presented thus: — in 2 Cor. 3 we have the ministry, in 2 Cor. 4 the minister, in 2 Cor. 5 his motives, and in 2 Cor. 6 his moral traits.

The ministry is of an exceedingly blessed character. The gospel — called here the gospel of the glory of Christ, — is put in contrast with the law. Paul had been made an able minister of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. The law was a ministration of death and of condemnation. It set forth, not what God is, as some have said, but what man ought to be. This was fatal to the creature. So helpless is the ruin of nature that none can render the righteous requirement. Law knows nothing of mercy. It proposes blessing — life and righteousness — to those who keep it; but thunders out a curse upon all who fail, whatever their plea.

Law came in with glory, as our chapter speaks. The circumstances in the giving of it were full of majesty. The mediator who brought it into the camp shone with the brightness of the glory he had been beholding, and had to put a veil on his face. Let it be observed that it is the second giving of the law that the apostle here refers to. This is important. The first tables were broken before they reached the camp, for Moses would not bring them in where the golden calf was. The second giving of the code was accompanied by a proclamation of long-suffering and sovereign grace (Ex. 34). It is this the apostle describes as a ministration of both death and condemnation. The law, even when thus accompanied, has this solemn character for all who have to do with it. A grave consideration surely for thousands in Christendom! For it is undeniable that those, who in this day take up law, speak of mercy at the same time. Well, even a mingled system is ruin for the creature. Law in any shape or form only works wrath for man, fallen and a sinner. None can escape this, whether in profession cleaving to Moses or Christ.

The old ministry is spoken of here as "that which is done away" (ver. 11). It came in incidentally as it were until the promised Seed came. God would make manifest to all the real condition of the creature ere the mighty remedy was introduced. So grievously have men misunderstood the declared object of God in giving the law that, instead of learning their true state by it, they have gone about to establish a righteousness of their own by its means. What utter blindness as to the real condition of flesh before God.

The gospel, on the contrary, is spoken of as "that which remaineth." It will never fade before a brighter glory. It is not the statement of what man ought to be, but of what God is. He has revealed Himself in His Son, and in a manner blessedly suitable to our need and condition. It is not merely introduced with, but it subsists in, glory. This is the glory that excelleth. It is divine testimony to One Who, having accomplished redemption, has gone up into the glory of God. Him we gaze upon with unveiled face, in perfect peace in the presence of infinite holiness. The children of Israel could not look on Moses' face because of its brightness; it is ours to gaze without interruption upon the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. He did not take His seat in that glory until every question relating to our souls was fully settled, and every foe was silenced. Unlike Moses who went up into the Mount, saying, "Peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin" (Ex. 32: 30), while the people stood trembling and mourning at the foot, He first made atonement and then went up to take His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high. If our sins were not all entirely removed before He was thus glorified, they never can be, for He will never come to earth to die again. Righteousness was accomplished and God was glorified, ere that place was taken by the Second Man, the Lord Jesus. Therefore the brighter the glory that shines in His face, the fuller the proof to our souls, and the deeper our peace and blessedness.

It is a ministry of righteousness, and of the Spirit. It is of righteousness, not in requiring it as under the law, but in revealing it unto all. "Now God's righteousness, apart from law, is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even God's righteousness which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe' (Rom. 3: 21. 22). God can now maintain His own consistency with Himself, yet hold as righteous every soul that believes in Jesus on the ground of redemption. It is not mercy, though He is rich in it and has lavished it upon us, but righteousness. He is perfectly righteous in all His dealings of grace with us through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Here is solid ground for our feet. Resting here, peace is sure and settled.

It is a ministry of the Spirit also. This God never even proposed to confer as the result of law-keeping. The holy anointing oil could not be poured on flesh (Ex. 30: 31, 32). The Spirit could not be granted as the reward of man's work. But God has put this honour on the work of Jesus. The Spirit has come out from the glory into which He has entered, and is God's gift to all who believe the gospel of God's salvation. How could we wish to go back to law? Yet the Galatians did so. And many in this day say to their own loss, that "the old wine is better." This is the gospel, the wonderful ministry, Paul had received. It is not a dry abstract statement of doctrine, but a precious testimony to Christ's glory, and confers righteousness and the Spirit on all who bow to it. But the Spirit of God having come, He leads up our hearts to where Christ is. The new man finds delight in Christ, nowhere else. The Spirit is the living link between us and Himself in glory. He causes us to gaze upon Him, and we become changed into the same image from glory to glory. This is true Christianity — the heart drawn off from things here, and adoringly occupied with One up there. This we may call the permanent result of the gospel, though there is progression in it. From the moment we believe and are sealed, our faces are turned upward and our backs are turned upon the world, and we become increasingly conformed to Christ. It is the delight of the Spirit to make us so.

Such is the ministry. 2 Cor. 4 brings before us the minister. The ministry imparted its own character to the vessel; it formed him, so to speak. He did not faint (though there was much to cause him to do so), being energised and sustained by the glory of Christ. "Strengthened with all might according to the power of His glory." He was guileless, walking transparently without a veil. How could he preach such a gospel and be otherwise? He eschewed the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in darkness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully. He gave the truth forth in all its purity.

It received no adulteration in passing through such a vessel. The God who once commanded the light to shine out of darkness, had Himself shined in Paul's heart, for the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The apostle was thus a vessel of heavenly light, set here to shed a holy radiance around. Are we this practically? It is not merely that Paul set forth in his teachings the doctrines of these things. Assuredly he did so. But the words mean more than this. He was all this in himself, as well as in his teaching.

He was a vessel of heavenly light. The treasure was in an earthen vessel, that the excellency of the power might be manifestly of God and not of man. Who but God could have accomplished all that Paul carried out in the face of habitual and serious opposition, with the added difficulty of a thorn in the flesh? But the vessel must be broken, in order to the effectual shining forth of the heavenly testimony. The allusion is doubtless to Gideon's lamps and pitchers. The lamps were placed within the pitchers, and the pitchers had to be smashed (Judges 8). Thus did God bring power out of weakness. "The foolishness of God is wiser than men: and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1: 25).

The breaking process is touchingly described. "Troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not forsaken; cast down but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body." Precious servant of Christ! Treading with scarce a falter, a path of unparalleled trial and suffering for the sake of Christ; filling up that which was behind of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh for His body's sake, the church; meeting nothing but reproach and loss on every hand. Yet some were heartless at Corinth, in Galatia, etc., to call in question such a minister and ministry! So infatuated had some become with that which puts honour on flesh and gives it sanction, that they had lost their appreciation of the heavenly testimony and ways of the apostle Paul. Well, the Lord valued it all, if men did not; He estimated all things duly, if erring saints failed to do so. What comfort for the heart!

What wonders grace accomplishes! Here was one, who gloried formerly in fleshly advantages and legal attainments, and who hated and persecuted to the death those who believed in Jesus, now content to let all things go for His Name, to carry daily the sentence of death in his person, and to shed his last drop of blood in the service of Christ and the church. The life of Christ operated so powerfully in him, and heavenly things were so absorbing, that life as regards the body might be yielded up, and afflictions seemed light and momentary. If his path ended at last in death, he rested in the assurance that He Who raised up the Lord Jesus would raise him up also through Jesus, and present him in the glory with the saints he had borne so well and so constantly on his heart in his service below. This is a ministry indeed. Yet this is not the perfect Servant. But comparing ourselves even with Paul, how deeply, beloved brethren, do we come short? Is there not a tendency with us to seek our own, and not the things of Jesus Christ? Are we not prone to seek a comfortable pathway in our service, and to shun reproach and suffering? Is there not a danger of flesh and the world proving a snare to our hearts? Let us search ourselves closely in the light of the Divine Presence.

In 2 Cor. 5 we get the motives of the minister. There are three, the coming glory, the judgment seat, and the love of Christ. As to the bright future, the apostle was full of holy confidence. We know that if the earthly tabernacle be destroyed we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. If life has to be laid down, we are confident that we shall be clothed at the appointed moment, and shall be like the Son. But we do not look for dissolution, but for Christ's coming, that the power of life in Christ may swallow up mortality. We anticipate a glorious change at the fulfilment of the blessed hope. Let it be distinctly understood that the apostle himself looked for this. By no means did he relegate the Lord's coming to a distant day. It is a mark of the evil servant so to do, and such was not Paul. True, when he wrote the second Epistle to Timothy, he spoke differently;

but the Lord had then made known to him that he must go into death for His sake, and be amongst the sleepers at His coming. Peter was similarly acquainted by the Lord.

God hath wrought us for the glory. His purpose, when first He began in our souls, was to have us ultimately like His Son. He has predestinated us to be "conformed to the image of His Son, that He may be the First-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8: 29). Meanwhile He has given us the Spirit as earnest. Thus are we filled with confidence. If we fall asleep, it is but absence from the body, to be at home with the Lord. All this with the apostle became a motive for service. "Wherefore we labour that whether present or absent, we may be acceptable to Him" (2 Cor. 5: 9). How could he help labouring for such a Lord? To have been marked out for glory, to be assured of the presence of the Spirit meanwhile, so filled the apostle with adoring gratitude that he was very gladly willing to spend and be spent for Him.

Then comes the judgment seat. "We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ." This includes saints as well as sinners. Not that all will stand before the Lord together, nor with the same issues; Those who believe in Jesus, and are at peace with God, through His work, are in the possession of eternal life in His Son, and thus beyond judgment. Christ cannot judge His own handiwork. But all must be told out, that we may know the real truth as to His grace and as to our selves; and that any rewards that are due for faithful service may be dealt out by the Lord. But how solemn it will be for some to stand before Christ! What confusion of face; what eternal ruin! In all the nakedness of nature, without a rag in which to appear, without a single plea; only to be righteously expelled from Him into eternal woe!

The thought of it quickened the apostle, and became a second motive for service and ministry. "knowing therefore the terror of the Lord we persuade men." Does it act thus with us, beloved brethren? Satan seems determined in our day to remove this motive for service altogether. Never were the terrors of the judgment to come so softened, not to say openly denied. But this is to act falsely with men, and to become tools of the enemy. Paul had the future, with its tremendous and appalling issues fully before his eyes; and it had the effect of making him even more zealous in his labour for Christ among men.

The third motive is by no means the least, but rather the spring of all. "The love of Christ constraineth us." He thought of Him coming down to where men were, walking here in an attitude of reconciliation toward men, then going into death, that He might close the history of the first man and lay a righteous ground of reconciliation, and for the new creation. This wondrous love filled the heart of the apostle, and was a constraining power. It caused him to go forth throughout the Gentile world, as an ambassador of the absent Christ, with this blessed ministry of reconciliation, beseeching men, as it were, on God's part to be reconciled to God. Service is of but little worth, if love is not the spring. "Servile work" can never satisfy Christ. But what will not love endure? What will not it accomplish for its object?

Now we come to the moral traits of the minister (2 Cor. 6). The apostle and his fellow-workers besought the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain. He speaks of beseeching sinners in 2 Cor. 5: 20; now he beseeches saints. If they turned out badly, the ministry was blamed, and thus the Lord was dishonoured. John presents the matter similarly in his Epistles (1 John 2: 28, 2 John 8). As for Paul, how did he behave? "In all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God." He was most anxious to be without reproach, and to preserve a true character as Gods minister, in whom the divine glory was in measure. bound up. Faithful man! He not only set forth the truth by word of mouth, but exemplified it in all his ways. Our teaching has only the weight which our lives give to it.

The first moral trait is "much patience." This is found in the front rank in chap. 12 also. In Paul it was proved "in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses." None endured what he did in the service of Christ. But is there no place for it now, because persecution has ceased? Assuredly there is. Latter-day service in the assembly of God is not infrequently of a distressing and discouraging character. With declining love on every hand, the world coming into the hallowed circle, and growing indifference to the claims of Christ, the spiritual labourer needs "much patience." I refrain from going further into detail at this time. Let the whole chapter be examined with all its features, and may the Holy Spirit of God produce these things in us all for Christ's glory. W. W. F.