

The Ministry and the Minister

W. Kelly.

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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 lawkeeping. 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 know 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.