

The Ministry of the Church - Part 5

by T. Austin-Sparks

The ministry of the church is a divine calling to reflect the glory of Christ from our inward being, and it is a costly way that requires us to stand up to the forces of evil.

Duration: 52:38

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding the main purpose of the ministry. He poses the question of how to define and summarize this ministry. The answer is found in the book of 2 Corinthians, where the word 'glory' is mentioned thirteen times in just a few verses. The speaker explains that the ministry is ultimately about revealing and reflecting the glory of God, specifically through the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The goal is for believers to be transformed into the image of Christ, from glory to glory, by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

We read a few verses, again, familiar, and familiar to us because they have been before us several times already in the second letter to the Corinthians, and chapter three. I want to read just the last verse of chapter three. But we all, with unveiled face, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord, the Spirit.

Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, even as we obtained mercy, we think not that we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by the manifestation of the truth, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But, and if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled in them that are perishing, in whom the God of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

See, it is God that said, light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Now, in these hours which we have been spending, and are still spending together, we have been brought again to a recognition of the ministry, the service of the people of God, of the church, universally and locally and individually, the ministry to which we are called. We have, says the apostle, this ministry, and as we go on, we add and add and add to this ministry the many things that are said about it, seeing it from its various standpoints and in its various aspects, as

we have been doing, seeing what this ministry which is given to us and to which we individually as well as collectively are called.

As we get on, by no means to the end, but as we get on it becomes necessary and very important that we should focus it all upon its main and its supreme issue. If now, after all that has been said, this time spent, we were asked to put into a brief phrase what this ministry is, I wonder what we should say. I wonder how you would sum up all this that has been said and define this clause here, this, having this ministry.

If we can only get hold of that concisely and precisely, be able to see clearly, grasp what this ministry really is, and go away with that, not a whole lot of teaching, things said, but the issue of it all. What does it really amount to? What are we committed to, perhaps more deeply than ever? What is going to characterize us as some of those called to this ministry? What is going to characterize us henceforth in a new, much more positive way? Can we put it into a phrase? Now, it is not difficult to find in these first four chapters of this second letter to the Corinthians. I remind you that it is mentioned no fewer than thirteen times from the end of chapter three into chapter four, and mentioned by one word.

I'm sure you will realize that this is the heart of the thing. If in just a few verses, quite a few verses, from verse nine, verse eight of chapter three, to verse two of chapter four, thirteen times this whole letter's purpose and object is put into one word, and that word is glory. Now, just put a ring around it if you like, henceforth you've got the key to the letter, but you've got more than that.

You've got the key to all that this ministry committed to us really means. It is nothing other, nothing less than the glory of the Lord Jesus. It will be a long, but very fruitful study to take that word and carry it right through the letter, back into the first letter, and through, into and through the second letter, and see what it means.

What the glory of the Lord Jesus really does mean. What it is set over against. How it solves all the problems.

How it becomes the dynamic, the all-governing concern of the people of God. The glory of the Lord Jesus. That's the test of everything.

It's the test of behavior. That takes us back into the first letter, doesn't it? The behavior which was so unworthy of the Lord Jesus. Conduct of those Corinthians after the Apostle had left them.

Left them to themselves without his presence, and present power and influence. Left them for four years or more. How their level fell.

Spiritual life declined, and all that came in that is so shameful, reproachful, unworthy of Christ. The glory of Christ stands over against all behavior and conduct. What we do, and how we live, and so much more, which is not for the present my occupation.

I want to come right to this whole question. This whole matter of the glory as the governing thing in the active life and presence of the people of God in this world. We've said some things about it already.

How it works out, as you know. Having commenced with a very full recognition of the fact that if the glory of the Lord Jesus is the very object for which the Lord's people are here in this age, it's a costly way. We noticed, as the Apostle said right at the beginning of this matter, about the afflictions of Christ, the sufferings of Christ, abounding unto us.

And how real they were in his own experience, the costliness of standing for the glory of the Lord Jesus. Now, for time's sake, let us come to this fourth chapter. In these first six verses, we have these well-known words.

Seeing it is God who said, let light be. Literally, that is what is here. God who said, let light be.

Presently, the Apostle will refer to a new creation. This is what is in the back of his mind. God who said, let light be, shines into our hearts to give the light of the glory of God.

Shines into our hearts the light of the glory in the face of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God. The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, now in our hearts. We have already dwelt considerably upon the light upon the face of Moses when he came down from the mount.

And when he stood before the people to read the word of God, the veil that he had to put on because they could not look steadfastly at his face. The Apostle says, in effect, and this is what he is meaning, the light of the glory of God was on the face of Moses, but it could not enter into the heart of the people then. They had not the capacity or the ability to receive it into their hearts.

But the light in the face of Jesus Christ, same glory of God, now in the face of Jesus Christ, the veil is taken away and has entered into our hearts. It has got inside. That is the change in the dispensation.

What was all external and objective has now become inward. God has shined in or into our hearts. God said, let light be.

In the first creation, outward objective. In the new creation, inward. Shined into our hearts.

Let's pause for a moment with this way in which the Apostle puts it. It is a figurative way. We have to get our mentalities adjusted over many of these things.

We, of course, naturally and immediately get mental pictures. When it says, glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we quite naturally, instinctively think of a countenance. Go to his face.

But that is not what the Apostle is talking about. He is only using it as a figure. The same word is translated in another way in this letter twice.

And it is otherwise translated person. You find that in verse 11 of chapter 1. He also helping together on our behalf by your supplication that for the gift bestowed upon us by means of many, thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf. And that word persons there is the same word in the Greek as face in chapter 4. And then you have the same thing again in chapter 8. Chapter 8 and verse 24.

Show ye therefore unto them in the face of the churches the proof of your love. Same word in the face of the churches. You know what that means? Not the physical faces of people in the churches.

It means before the people themselves. People themselves. So this word face just means the person of Jesus Christ.

Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ. That he is the personal image, embodiment, impress of the glory of God. You know that in Hebrews chapter 1. That is exactly how it begins.

The express image or impress of the divine glory. And it is not the shining face as such the apostle is speaking about now. May the Lord give us more shining faces.

That doesn't excuse us. Excuse our miserable faces. Lord have mercy on us for our faces.

But the apostle is saying here. Jesus Christ is the personal embodiment and expression of the glory of God. And he has been revealed in our hearts.

It is the revelation of what Jesus Christ really is and means. His significance in God's universe. That has been revealed in our hearts.

In our hearts. The apostle based his whole life or his whole life and ministry was based upon this. It pleased God to reveal his son in me.

The counterpart of the outshining of the glory on the way to Damascus. He is saying it didn't stay outside. It got inside.

And in that light as I contemplated Jesus as a Nazareth. I saw how different he was from what I had thought and believed him to be of old beforehand as I persecuted him. I saw him.

Who he is. What he is. And I saw him.

I saw the effulgence of the divine glory in a man. In a man. Christ was the image.

And representation of God. Manifest. Manifest to faith.

I think it is a rather wonderful thing. Impressive thing. You know we think that we have got a lot of light now about the Lord Jesus.

Tremendous amount of light about the Lord Jesus. And perhaps we think or imagine that all that we know now is new since he was here in this world. Nothing of the kind.

All that we know now and all that ever we shall know or the people of God will know about the Lord Jesus after his ascension was true of him when he was here. It was all there. Who he was.

What he was. What his significance was. What was vested in him.

Everything of eternity was there in the man called Jesus of Nazareth. Nothing has been added to him. He hasn't been enlarged and increased.

It was all there. John was able to say we beheld his glory when he was here. Glory as of and only begotten of the Father.

Full of grace, truth. It was all there. But no one saw it unless it was revealed to them by the Father.

And when that happened even in the days of his flesh it was an amazement to those who had the revelation. When he asked his disciples who do you say? Who do you say that I am? And Peter by inspiration, revelation, illumination, by divine act said thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus said blessed art thou Simon son of Jonah.

Flesh and blood did not reveal that to you. I think Peter himself was as astonished as anybody that he had said that. But you see it was acts of divine illumination.

Familiar with the two on the Emmaus road. Jesus joined them. But it distinctly says that their eyes were holden.

They should not know him. And then at a given moment their eyes were opened. And what a difference that made.

And they will return Johnny and their exclamation when they arrived back in Jerusalem. Their eyes were opened. It was all there.

Everything was there in him. But no one saw it until God gave them the ability to see. That of course is something that challenges us.

We shall come on to that probably again in a few minutes. Like that. God who said let light be has shined into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory.

What is this ministry? It is the result. The result of divine fear. Something that God has done in us.

In every one of us. God has done something which is on the same principle as when this earth was without form and void. And darkness was over the face of the deep and the word of God was proclaimed.

He said let light be. And there was light. A divine fear, an act of the word of God.

Now Paul says on the same principle something has happened to us. Something has happened to us. That happening has come from God into our lives.

And that is the basis of our testimony. Of the church's ministry. Which of God and the church were living in the good of it.

The whole church. But that was actually true of the whole church. First there is the professing church.

And there is the real church. But this is the vocation committed to the people of God in this dispensation. To reflect the glory of Christ from our inward being.

The mirror is the mirror of our renewed regenerated spirit. Reflecting the glory. That's the word here isn't it? Reflecting the glory.

That's the ministry. Now I want to pause here. Why not wanting to multiply words.

I do feel we must really be very clear and practical. When we first come to the Lord. When this thing first happens.

Put it how you will. Use whatever form of explanation you may. Being converted or born again or whatever it is.

The thing. When that thing happens. There is the breaking into us of the glory.

And the glory does shine out. Doesn't it? Isn't that a wonderful thing to you? When the Lord Jesus. The Lord of glory came into your heart.

Wasn't it wonderful? Of course it was. With all of us. It was wonderful.

Now when that happened to me. I was preaching in the open air five nights a week. And the other nights.

Well they were in preparation for the rest. Week after week. Any opportunity to testify to the Lord Jesus.

I can see it now. It was just like that. It was also wonderful.

Gathered around a whole group of young men. Come into the same experience. And what a glory time it was.

We were called the glory boys. Glory. True.

But that isn't what I'm wanting to get at. We come into experiences of trial, adversity and suffering. The apostles talking much about the sufferings of Christ which abound unto us.

And the danger is as it took place in Corinth that we should lose the glory. We should lose the glory. That's our peril.

Indifficulties, adversities and trials. Things don't go as we like them to go. Things become quite difficult for us.

And don't you dear Christian friends put a divide between your secular life and your spiritual life. And say well you see things happen to me. They're part of my job in this world.

The work that I'm doing. The place where I'm having to work. That's one thing.

My Christian life, well that's in another realm. Don't do that. Don't do that for a moment.

You will find that the assault upon the glory is made more by evil powers than by people. Oh the people may be the difficult ones. The awkward ones.

The ones that give you a bad time. May all be in that human realm you think. But don't forget that if you have been called into fellowship with God's Son.

You have been called into the ministry of the glory. And there is nothing. There is nothing in all your life and our life which the enemy will not take hold of to be clouded by glory.

To rob him of the glory in us. Whether it be physical or circumstantial or whatever it is. There is something more than the ordinary happenings and circumstances of human life.

Remember that. Oh the young Christians need to be reminded of that. We older ones are not ignorant of his devices.

We know quite well that the simplest thing in ordinary daily life as we think can be a trick of the devil. Trick of the devil. That.

When that telephone rang at that moment. It was the most inopportune moment that it could ring. But it related to something.

We were in prayer getting hold of the Lord. Interruptions. There is something more than the thing.

The thing that goes wrong. There are, Paul says, hosts of wicked spirits. Hosts of them.

You can't count them. They are everywhere. We don't want to get our eyes on them.

But we do want to note this. That they are after the glory. They are.

Their whole attention is focused upon the glory of the Lord Jesus. Now you can see from some things we have already said. But if you read this letter, this second letter to the Corinthians again.

You can see that by a whole host of incidents in this man's life, Paul's life. The reactions of this group, this influential, powerful group in Corinth to him personally. Discrediting him.

Defaming him. Detracting from his ministry. Trying to expose his weaknesses.

His physical disabilities and saying his personal presence is contemptible. And his speech. His speech.

It's contemptible. All these things about him. And then all the other list of things that he gives us.

Chapter 6. Chapter 12. What a lot of things there were. All against.

He knew what he was talking about when he spoke of hosts of wicked spirits. In the shipwreck. And the many shipwrecks to which he refers.

And all these other things. These forces of evil were out to destroy the ministry of the glory of Christ. In and through this man.

That's the meaning of it. They are after the glory. They knew very well that God had shined into the heart of this man.

The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus was in this man's heart. Therefore he is a marked man. For the glory in him is marked.

A terrific battle. It's the battle of the glory. That is why in using this word or term the veil.

The veil. He's used it about Israel. The veil was over their face.

It is over their face even to this day. They cannot, they cannot receive the glory. They cannot see the glory.

Using that phrase, the veil. He takes it up in another connection. If our gospel be hid.

It is veiled. In them that believe not. In whom the God of this world hath blinded.

Lest the light of the glory should shine into them. And that is why the Lord Jesus was so particularly interested in blind people. He seems to have had a particular interest in blind people.

No blind person ever failed to have his sympathy, interest and help. And all that he did for death and dumb and everyone else. I'm not saying he wasn't interested in them.

It seems that the instances which stand out most fully in his activities when here. Are those in relation to blind people. And you know quite well that the giving sight to the blind.

The man born blind. is in the context of, I am the light of the world. I am the light of the world.

The seeing, you see, the seeing faculty, is a divinely written thing, for the sake of the glory. Oh dear friends, this is so challenging to me and to you. The challenge comes here.

I don't want to make it difficult, but if I make it difficult for you, I'm making it equally difficult for myself. The challenge comes here. That which we have, of truth, of teaching, of what we call, technically, light, and we have a lot.

We have a tremendous amount of teaching. That's only another word, you know, for the word doctrine. You can choose what you like.

Teaching, doctrine, a tremendous amount of them. There is an immense amount of light, light, given to the church. Many of us have come into that realm of large degrees of truth and teaching.

Now the challenge is here. How much of that really becomes the outshining of his glory? Can we stand up to that? Because, you see, the very principle of inshining is that the light of the glory of God should be in our hearts and should be reflected. Put that in a practical way.

How much, when we have finished our course, be it shorter or longer, will people be able to say, thank God for that man, for that woman, because really, through him, through her, I came into a living knowledge of the Lord Jesus. In some fuller way, perhaps. Or at the beginning.

The glory of God in the face of Jesus came into my life as reflected by the mirror of that man and that woman. That's the test of all our teaching. Now I say, we've got so much of it and yet we deny it in our behavior and our presence.

So much that contradicts it, isn't there? And here we are having meeting after meeting, hour after hour, piling up the teaching. The test of it all is not going to be that we have a lot more of what is technically called night. The test of our being here in these times, this very hour, and its value is going to be, will people be able to see the Lord Jesus and the glorious Lord Jesus more? Won't they? You see, this is exactly what the apostle was getting at with these Corinthians.

There had been a shameful contradiction of the gospel. Their behavior, their character, almost every way in that first letter there was a contradiction of the glory. And now he is coming back with his second letter and being on the positive side.

He was, so to speak, on the negative, but the Lord have mercy upon us that the first letter in Corinthians is negative. It's a sledgehammer, isn't it? And a sledgehammer isn't a negative thing, you know. But it was on the negative side of correction, correction, correction, showing the wrong, pointing it out.

I could not speak to you as under spiritual, but as under carnal. Now having dealt with a thing like that, judged it, he now turns over to the positive side and says in effect, now really, Corinthians, the only justification of our existence as the people of God is that the glory of Jesus Christ is shining out from us, has come into us, and is being seen, unknown, around us, where we are. Clear your mental pictures.

Glory to Jesus Christ. Sometimes it is just in our quiet, patient endurance, whereas other people would begin to show their resentment and their bad temper and react to what is done and what is put on them in a sulky way, a disagreeable way, with a vengeful spirit down under it. Quiet, steady, humble, patient,

endurance, suffering wrong rather than doing wrong.

That's the glory of Jesus. You know, Peter brings that right out, doesn't he, in his letter. If ye suffer for well-doing, this is grace with God.

This is grace. And what is grace but the glory of God? It is. Well, you're putting up with a lot this afternoon, aren't you? But we really do want these times to have practical outcome, don't we? Go away and say we had some meetings at Easter and the subject was so-and-so and the speaker was so-and-so and a very happy time, got a lot of light.

Oh, God save us from just that repeated through the years, again and again. No. It's got to be this, that the light has got to get inside and then there's to be a seeing in that light of the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Glory of the Lord. Now, Paul will go on in a minute about the new creation. And he will say that if any man be in Christ, there is a new creation.

Brought about by this divine fear, God said, let light be, the result in any man. Brought down the very personal individual. If any man be in Christ.

On this principle, God said, let light be in that heart. There is a new creation. Same field.

For a spiritual new creation as for the former material creation. Now, of all the things that belong to that new creation, there's only one that I'm going to mention now. It is this.

When God at the beginning, over the chaos and darkness, of the unformed world said, let light be and there was light, the coming of the light was only the beginning of a process. It started something. It was not an end in itself.

It did not come and there remain, like death, just the existence and presence of light. It set things going, and because of the presence of the light, out of the chaos, there came form, order, fruitfulness, in like manner, when the light shines into our hearts, the light of God shines into our hearts in the face of Jesus Christ, in the person of Jesus Christ. It's the beginning of a formation, a constituting of a divine order in our lives.

Now, that's only for me to talk to you. It doesn't apply to you, but don't you feel there's some gap somewhere, some gap, some lack, when somebody professes to accept Christ and all those disorderlinesses of their life, I'll only mention them, outward things and other things, their behavior. These things do not disappear.

They do not change. They bring their disorderliness over into Christianity. A lot of disorderliness isn't there in what is called the Christian life.

Something lacking, there's a gap somewhere. Maybe that they have not been properly taught, the foundation has not been properly laid, so that they've been made to understand what the Christian life really is, that is, it is a new creation where old things are passed away. What are these old things that are brought over? Old things are passed away because all has become new.

Now, what I am saying, whether it applies to you in that particular respect or not, behavior and appearance and all that sort of thing, it is not the glory of Christ at all. Not the glory of Christ. I was told some time ago of something that happened at the Keswick Convention.

A servant of the Lord was there and walking along the street, saw a girl coming towards her in a miniskirt and a lot less in other things than is modest. Hair, you know all about it, and on her a placard, a text, a text, wearing a text. I forget what the words were.

Something about the Lord Jesus, coming to the Lord Jesus. It was this. This dear servant of the Lord saw this poor child coming along like this.

Heartache. She felt ill. And so she spoke to the girl.

Do you really feel that this commends your Master? Do you really think that this is to the glory of the Lord Jesus? You evidently profess to be His. You want to show the world, but do you really think that this will convey our right impression of the Lord Jesus? The girl, her face dropped. I never thought about it.

It never occurred to me. No one ever said anything to me. Well, the work was done, the girl went and changed, and it was put all right.

Do you see what I mean? Now, it doesn't apply to any of you. But the principle is this, that there are lots of old things that have got to go. When Jesus is revealed in the heart, they are incompatible with the Lord Jesus.

They are a contradiction to Him. And if we really do see the Lord Jesus, not in those things that I have hinted at, but in many other ways, we'll be putting things right, you know. We will shed many old things.

We cannot, the point is, we cannot really see the Lord Jesus and go on in any way that contradicts Him. That's the message of this letter. And after all our teaching, the test arises, have we seen, is it evident, is it evident, for this is what it is, reflecting as a mirror, a glory, is it evident that we have seen Him? Now, seeing through teaching, is it evident in our home that something has happened in us, in our place of work, not only, and sometimes not at all by our preaching, by carrying a Bible in our hands, but by us, ourselves, our very presence there.

Is it evident that something has been done by God in us? That is what we are here for as companies of the Lord's people, as well as individuals. Having this ministry, we have renounced the things of dishonesty, that are not honestly in keeping with Christ. We have renounced them.

Not walking in craftiness, or literally not making merchandise of the Word of God. Using divine things for our own gain and interest. Not handling the Word of God deceitfully.

Contradiction. But commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. It is testing, it is challenging.

Now, you've had to put up with a lot, and I've really been fighting to get to the heart of this. I tell you quite frankly, friends, I'm ministering all over the world to so many, and I get very tired of ministering. Very tired of ministering.

I often wish the Lord would spare me more ministry for this reason. That there does seem to be such a gap between their knowledge of Bible truth and the measure, the expression of Christ in them. You can have all this truth, as it is called, this light, and meet so much that is un-Christlike.

Un-Christlike in the people who have it all. They can be cruel, they can be hard, exacting, like these Corinthians. What Paul suffered from them, if they had the truth, he'd spent two whole years, day and

night, pouring himself out to that church in Corinth.

Well, I hope you're suffering this, not taking it other than with the grace of God.

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