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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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"This Ministry"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 2 Cor. 4:1-7

The first verse contains the little clause upon which everything in this letter hangs, "Therefore, seeing we have *this ministry*" "This ministry." — We recognise that this letter is being written to the believers at Corinth, and one of the features of this letter, and the letters of Paul in general, is the way in which he unites those to whom he writes with himself, and himself with them, and makes it one matter. He is not saying, "Therefore, seeing I have this ministry." He is saying, *we* have this ministry, and if we just look back and on we will see how he brings them into oneness with himself. It is one of his great principles. It is basic to what the apostle is seeking to do, because these Corinthians had challenged him very seriously and raised many questions about him, some disputing his apostleship, and he has met with a good deal of suspicion and doubt and opposition. He is a man in the presence of people in the church who do not like him, and who do not want him, and who would rule him out and would prefer others to him, and he has to meet a difficulty like that. The difficulty that many ministers have had to meet. How are you going to meet people in the church who really do not like you, and do not want you, and are saying all kinds of things about you that are unworthy? An expression of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit is that He unites Himself to them and involves them in his own position and involves himself in theirs and deals with it as a common thing. Paul comes right down to them and speaks to them as though they were all facing common difficulties.

And so he says, "We have this ministry." Why I mention this is that we shall all recognise that we have this ministry. This does not belong to a certain set called "ministers" or "missionaries" in any official sense. It is the ministry of every child of God. It has its intensified forms in those who are separated unto the gospel in a special way, but we all have it. We are not thinking of "ministry" as some detached and hedged-around thing belonging to a certain class of people, but it is the whole house of God and the whole body of Christ. It is the ministry of every member, and every one of us in the ministry, and therefore these words apply to you in a very definite way. *We have this ministry.*

Here you have ministry revealed according to the mind of God. It is tremendously important to recognise how the ministry and the minister are one. That is one of the foundations here in this letter. You cannot separate them. The ministry will never be more than the minister, and the minister, in what he is, makes the ministry. And so this letter, which has to deal so much with this ministry is so very full of what is autobiography. It is the inner life of the servant of the Lord. The inner spiritual history of God's servant is here, and he does not hesitate to bring out the personal, inner, spiritual history of his on this very principle that the ministry is, after all, only the expression of what the man is in his inner spiritual history — what the Lord's servant is with the Lord himself. The ministry and the minister are interwoven, and the ministry is the outworking of what has taken place in secret with the Lord on the part of the Lord's servant.

That gets us altogether out of a professional realm and takes us out of the realm where we speak of "taking up" Christian work, or "going into the ministry." There is nothing in the New Testament that would suggest a mechanical entering into what is called the Lord's work. You cannot take it up. You cannot enter into it. It is the spontaneous expression of your own inner history with God. And, after all, the ministry is largely a question of personality. But that wants safeguarding. What is personality? I am speaking of it in the higher, spiritual sense. Personality is character formed in secret with God. If you can get the inside out of that, you have gone a long way in understanding the "ministry." It is the expression amongst men of what has taken place apart from men, where men have not seen and do not know, where they are unable to trace what is happening. The deep, inner, secret history where the Lord alone knows what is taking place. And sometimes the individual himself does not know what is happening.

God has got him into a realm beyond his own depths and certainly where no one else understands him, and it is there that spiritual personality is being formed. And then eventually, out from those deep dealings of God with him, in the hidden place he comes out with a message, and it is not something he has arranged and prepared and put down on paper. It is the expression of something that God has done in him, not only shown *to* him, but done *in* him, for the showing follows the doing. He shows the meaning of what He has done, and that makes the message.

Presently, when you have gone through, God begins to interpret what He has been doing and you come out with a testimony. The Lord Jesus Himself had this experience. We pointed out the other day that when He came out and publicly stood before heaven and men and hell, two things happened. On the one hand the Father said, "Thou art My Beloved Son." On the other hand, "This is My Beloved Son," calling the attention of men to Him as approved of God. These two things were the result of thirty years secret history with God. It was not that He had taken up that ministry and got a kind of Divine ordination. He had been living before God and in secret with God a long time. Possibly one of the reasons why there is the break at the age of twelve years is that the Lord Jesus has really had some conception of His life work — "Wist ye not that I must be in My Father's house?" He is repudiating Joseph there and then, and He is linking Himself to His Father, so that really, as a lad, He

had the conception of His heavenly relationship. And, just think, that growing into young manhood He can only believe that during a stretch of years He was all the time living in view of a day which seemed never to come, when He would enter into His life work, and He had to live through the time of seeming spiritual inaction, of not reaching His real life work, not going into His work, but living His life before God, well pleasing to God, so that when at length the day came and He was able to discern, He came forth with the words, "The time is fulfilled." If, during this time before, there had been that which was not pleasing to the Father, the heavens would not have been opened. Personality and character developed in the secret place with God. His brethren did not believe on Him, His mother did not talk about it, so that He simply had to live in secret with God.

That is a basic principle of ministry. It is a tragic thing to take a young man or a young woman and give them a short time in a Bible school and push them out into the full responsibility of God's work. They have not got the deep history wrought out in secret with God which makes them able to meet the full force of the Satanic opposition. They will either have to go to pieces or compromise and come down to a lower level. There is no loss of time in keeping back. God would take us through the depths. We think that everything is seeming to be delayed, but presently we shall know. Something is happening to make us able ministers of the New Covenant. It is not collegiate preparation, it is not training in the schools; it is a secret history with God.

Paul was over twelve months in the church in Antioch, but the saints are taking account. Saul knows from God what his life work is, and I wonder if he chafed during that time. But he stayed there, and in the secret he was approving himself before God, and when the Holy Spirit says to the elders "Separate me Saul" there is no question in their minds that this man had proved himself. No, they are ready to immediately act because God has in that stretch of time called their attention to this man and made them take account of him. And so they know and when the Lord's time comes they do it. They laid their hands upon them and let them go.

And so this ministry is not the professional ministry, not according to the system of our day. But this ministry comes out of a secret history with God and this ministry demands that and it cannot be effective beyond the measure of what has been wrought in the secret place with God. Do not break away from God to get into your ministry.

This servant's character has been formed. Christ is interwoven with his ministry. "Paul a servant of God through the will of God." The second feature of this ministry is "through the will of God." The way in which Paul starts his letters will give you a key to what he is going to say. He is here establishing at once the authority of his ministry. It is "through the will of God." He is going to tell you what ministry by God's appointment is. And only ministry that has this back of it has the authority of God upon it. It is a tremendous thing to get the Divine seal. How did we get into the Lord's service? Did we become suddenly interested in Christian work and take it up? How did we get in? How is it we have stayed in? Are we here because we know it is the will of God?

This ministry must have the authority of God in it, and the authority of God is the attestation from heaven which comes in your own heart when God has seen in you the development in secret of what He was seeking to realise. You will never get the Divine ordination until you have been "approved unto God." It must be when His hands are laid on through an open heaven. And so we cannot be too strong in our emphasis upon the necessity and the importance of a secret life with God back of all ministry. It was so with the Lord; it was so with Paul, it has been so with everyone who has had this ministry. "He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists; and

some pastors and teachers." The gift will suffer and become purely professional unless the secret spiritual history is maintained in full strength. One of the perils of Christian activity is that you get so busy you neglect the secret history. You lose the background and presently you begin to discover you have not that which meets the demand. You are losing grip and power and you are on the highway to a breakdown. It is the loss of the secret place and the secret history with God, and one of the things that any servant of God has to do is to refuse that measure of activity which goes beyond the possibility of keeping an adequate secret history with God. We have to settle this, difficult as it is. Here is a call for ministry; we are not to accept it simply because it is an opening to do some good. We must go to the Lord in secret. We must never be called out because it is an opportunity for doing good. The enemy would keep us tremendously busy. One of the perils in these days is to be always active in the outside things, and your time with God becoming less and less. This ministry is founded on a deep life with God in secret.

God must be able to keep us constantly checked up in secret. We must go back to God and have those quiet times where the Lord can constantly say to us, "You remember so and so. That was not right. You will have to correct that." Perhaps we have said something wrong or failed to say something we should have said. God never passes it over, and if we gave God the quiet time He would bring up those things and we would be reminded of them. But if we ride on over those things, in the end the Lord will leave us to plunge on. It is what a man is before God, and not what he is before men.

"This ministry." What is this ministry? It is the only ministry that God approves. Preaching the gospel is not the first thing in this ministry. "Seeing 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 Christ." The light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ shined into our hearts. What surrounds this? The chapter before takes us back to Exodus 24. Moses had been with the Lord. He wist not that his face did shine, but people saw it and could not look upon it. And he was, after all, only reading the law. It was legalism, it was the law of death.

But here is the law of life in Christ. The God, Whose glory was on the face of Moses, then under a veil, has shined without a veil into our hearts. There is no veil over the face of Jesus Christ, and the unveiled face of Jesus Christ is revealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. "God hath shined into our hearts." What for? For the same purpose as with Moses — to make known the mind of God to others. How do others come to know the mind of God? By the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ being manifested out from our inner lives. From that, others are able to see the Lord; that we have an inner radiant knowledge of God. "Christ in you the hope of glory." God hath shined in and made us, not merely in what we say, but in what we are, an expression of Christ as the revelation of God. That is the ministry.

If that was applied to all ministry today, I wonder how much would survive. How much ministry today is the coming out of what is known of the glory of God in the heart? That is what we must have — a secret history with God. If all our ministry were like that, how much more would be accomplished for God.

"We have this treasure (this unveiling of the Lord Jesus in our hearts) in vessels of fragile clay." He keeps us from taking any of the glory to ourselves, from being anything men would take account of, "that the excellent greatness of the power might be of God and not out from ourselves." What a reflection of the revelation of Jesus Christ! The excellent greatness of the power of God revealed in

our hearts! Do you pray for power in your ministry? Get the excellent greatness of the power of Jesus Christ in your heart and you cannot get greater power.

Therefore, you see why the devil is out to blind the mind. For, once the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ gets through, his rule is at an end. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ which is going to scatter the enemy. When He shall be revealed, the enemy's day is over. And the exceeding greatness of the power in this ministry is that we may have the inshining of God revealing His glory in the face of Jesus Christ in our hearts. It *may* not be platform ministry. It is the Lord's ministry we are in, and there is to be an expression of the power of God in every bit of it.

The ministry is the showing forth of Jesus Christ. "It pleased God to reveal His Son in me, that I might proclaim *Him* among the nations." It was the inshining of Jesus Christ that made Paul a missionary. It is setting forth Christ. That is this ministry, and we should make it our prayer that what we know of the ministry for us will be a showing forth of Jesus Christ. It is the glory of the Father, and nothing can stand before it. In order that it might be so, the vessel should be such that it shall not take any glory away from Him. He will keep it weak so that everything will be to His glory. We must recognise the nature of the ministry before which principalities and powers cannot stand. It is not what we say. It is the measure in which the Lord Jesus Christ is mediated as the glory of God that counts.

The Ministry is the ministry of Christ and it is constituted solely upon the basis of what Christ is within us. That is the examination for the ministry. That is the certificate of the ministry. Paul tells them literally, "Ye are our epistles, read and known of all men," — you are our certificate of the ministry. By which he means that they are the result of what the Lord Jesus has been in us. The real credentials of the ministry is what the Lord Jesus is in our hearts. Seeing that it is Christ within that constitutes the ministry; that it is the ministration of Jesus Christ, we are able to take this extra step and see that Christ revealed within represents a position to which we have come. It represents that we have come to a large place. It means that we have come over Jordan.

You are familiar with the difference in the inheritance under Moses and under Joshua, and you will remember that under Moses there were two and a half tribes who obtained their inheritance on the other side of Jordan. Moses permitted them to do it although it was not God's first will. Under Moses He gave them an inheritance on the other side of Jordan, but all the rest had their inheritance over Jordan in the land and for them it was a question of fullness. For the others, it was partial and their inheritance was possessed without their getting into the land by the way of Jordan. And yet Moses gave this command that they should see their brethren over Jordan, so they had a kind of relationship to those who went over Jordan, but it was not an experimental one. It was a formal one. It was not a subjective one, it was an objective one. So that the meaning of Jordan for them was objective and not subjective.

Jordan, as we have heard, represents all the work of the Lord Jesus in His Cross — all that was bound up in the death and burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You can have it objectively and have an inheritance, but, if you have it subjectively, you have a far greater inheritance. The two and a half tribes had the objective benefits *only* — that which Christ *did for* them. The others went over and had what Christ had done for them and also what Christ did *in* them. It is not the something outward only that we rejoice in. The others went over in an inward way and they had the full inheritance of the land. It is always best to have the Jordan, with all it means, between you and your enemies. That is the Old Testament illustration for this.

In the New Testament the letter to the Romans illustrates this again. Romans 7 is the two and a half tribe's position. One day you may feel safe, but the next day you do not feel a bit safe. The thing is not settled within. You rejoice in what the Lord has done for you, but you are so conscious that you need something more than that. You need it all to be done in you. But when you go through into Chapter 8 you have got right into the land, and Chapter 9 leads you on to Ephesians and Colossians, and you find you are in the full inheritance, right in the land, your full inheritance in Christ.

And it is there that you come to have your full ministry. This particular ministry of which we are speaking is founded upon, first of all, that you are right over Jordan and Christ in His fullness is your possession, for Colossians is Christ in fullness and that fullness in us — "Christ in you the hope of glory." So that what 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 represent is that you have come to the place where "Christ is all". In first Corinthians it is not Christ is all. It is men and things — Paul, Apollos, gifts. Paul was labouring in the first letter to bring them to Christ. Now the work has been done, and second Corinthians brings in Christ in His fullness, and then you get the ministry of Christ in effect. Of course, when you get this revelation of Jesus Christ within, you get an addition and spiritually it represents the principle of God adding and so the Corinthians have come to an advanced position. You cannot fail to notice the change. The first letter leaves you in distress about this people, but the second letter sees a tremendous change. They have come on, and now the Apostle is able, right at the beginning, to talk about "God Who said light shall shine in darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The ministry according to God has power, like Joshua, to drive out the enemy and they have to flee. The ministry which is like that, which scatters the enemy, is based entirely upon the measure in which Christ is inwardly full in us. If only we could get back to this basis of ministry! The ministry of Jesus Christ is nothing more nor less than the revelation of Jesus Christ in the heart of the child of God, and you are going to minister more or less effectively according to the measure of what Christ is in you inwardly. God cannot go beyond that. All the other ministry we talk about does not come within the Divine thought. It makes the ministry a very simple thing, but a very searching thing. It is not qualification as speakers. It is not any scholastic equipment. Thank God for anything that may be helpful, but if you begin to count on that you are making a mistake. It is not that we are able to speak. It is not that we have academic gifts or equipment, but it is just what the Lord Jesus is in us and to us, being shown through us. You may be the poorest speaker, but Christ can shine out, and the impact of Jesus Christ within your life can be such that the enemy begins to stir up. "Jesus I know" — that is the ministry — where the forces of evil are forced to take account of the presence of Christ before you speak, where others around you are conscious that there is something here that makes it difficult for them to sin without knowing that they are sinning. Some may sin and not know they are sinning until Christ comes on the scene in one of His servants, and then they are smitten. It is the presence of Christ. "God hath shined into our hearts."

We may preach all the sermons that ever men could preach and it will accomplish nothing if Christ is not the registration of our presence. It is Christ-consciousness produced through the man and the woman in whom He reigns. It is the measure of the inheritance.

And the ministry is open to all. "We have this ministry," and we have this treasure in a vessel of fragile clay. Why does God choose vessels like that? Why is it that if He gets a highly polished vessel in itself, He has to bring such a vessel to be very little in its own eyes? Paul, with all his advantages, is brought to the place where all these things are rubbish. Why a vessel broken? To make room for the Lord Jesus. To give Him all the place. The measure of *Christ* is the measure of the ministry, not the

measure of the vessel. And, although it costs, I think we are prepared to be broken if only Christ is commensurately revealed

And, of course, when we get into ministry like that, we expect certain things. We get the full impact of the devil. "We are pressed on every side." The ministry of Christ brings you immediately into direct contact with the forces of the devil, but in those conditions the ministry is vindicated because, under pressure, persecution, trial, you are not destroyed; you are not left behind. "That the life also of Jesus may be manifested." Here is a fragile vessel. In itself you would not give anything for it. In itself it is a very poor thing, and yet hell has been let loose upon that fragile thing and hell has been defeated. What is the secret of that? It is Christ in the vessel, the life whereby Jesus conquered death, in a vessel like that. That is the ministry. That the Lord Jesus Who has conquered death in a vessel is simply proving hell impotent. That is when the Lord has His full place. We have this ministry, and as we have received this ministry, we faint not. "Though our outward man does perish, our inward man is being renewed day by day." "And our light affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen." What the Lord wants to do is to make a large place for Christ in us.