

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 29 April 2007

No.: T0467

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The cost of ministry - 2 Corinthians 1-3

Today we begin a series of six talks on "Christian ministry and the minister". These talks are based on 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. How important it is, especially today, for all who seek to serve the Lord Jesus in any way to have their lives and their service firmly based on what Scripture teaches.

In the last chapter of John's Gospel, we have an account of the public restoration of the disciple Peter who had so signally failed when he denied the Lord Jesus three times in the house of Annas, the High Priest. Following each of the Lord's questions to Peter and his answers, the Lord tells Peter: "feed my lambs", "shepherd my sheep", "feed my sheep", verses 16-18. These commands must have encouraged Peter greatly and he clearly remembered them throughout his life. When he wrote his 1 Peter to Jewish believers who were scattered because of their faith in God, he commended to **them** the rich blessings they should enjoy in spite of the persecution they were experiencing. In 1 Peter 5:2 he says to those experienced among them: "Feed the flock of God which is among you". Peter now passed on that early direction from the Lord; the Church of God needed to be ministered to in every way possible.

Let us not limit the biblical meaning of the work of a "minister". We may tend to think only of a preacher, the individual who provides the sermon, but the Bible gives us more scope in the word than that. The minister would do well to be a shepherd, feeding the flock, caring for them and building up the Church. In 1 Corinthians, his first letter to these Corinthian believers, Paul lists a number of functions in 12:28 of which he says, "God hath set in the church". These include not only speaking but "helps, governments" and other ways of encouraging the local believers. He also addressed the Ephesian Church similarly, reminding them that gifts are given for "the work of the ministry", 4:12. Then in Romans 16:1-2 the apostle commends to the church in Rome "Phoebe our sister, which is a servant (or minister) of the church...for she has been a succourer (or helper) of many". In how many practical ways she had helped the members of the Church!

Corinth was very dear to the heart of Paul. In Acts 18 we learn of the problems of that city; we also learn of the joys the apostle had there. He spent eighteen months just with that Church, where many came to trust the Lord Jesus as their Saviour. Having been of such help to them, the apostle had the perfect right to help them now by letter.

Coming now to our subject of 2 Corinthians, the central theme going through this letter is that of **ministry** to the body of Christ, the Church. Where the word is used in this letter, it comes from a Greek word meaning servant or service; a minister is a servant! Paul speaks not only of his own experience but gives spiritual principles and lessons which apply to all believers. This letter, therefore, should be of great help to believers everywhere. The letter was written to follow up the first letter. There were so many problems at Corinth and the apostle was most forthright in what he said to the Corinthian Church. Having sent it he was very concerned as to how it would be received. What would the reaction be? Would Corinth listen to his guidance or not? When Paul received a report from Titus, he was very encouraged and gladly wrote once more.

God the Comforter. 1:3-7.

Following his introduction, the apostle gives thanks to God. No better way to start a letter! He is "the God of all comfort", a tremendous fact in every difficulty. Paul shows, too, what he has suffered as a minister of Christ. His concerns, his sufferings, were the result of faithfully presenting the truth and were on account of all he was doing for the Lord Jesus Christ. All was borne on account of the Corinthian Church. This Lord, Paul says, "comforteth (or encourages) us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God", verse 4. In all his trial, he had drawn near to God who had met his need and encouraged him. This fitted him to help others in need also. There is a distinct principle here for those who desire to minister to the needs of the body of Christ. God must minister to our hearts first if we are to be able to minister to others. The apostle had learned practically of the sufferings of Christ and was then in a position to console others in need, verse 5.

Paul's experience. 1:8-14.

Something else has happened. Whatever the circumstances were to which Paul referred, we cannot be sure but he says, "we despaired even of life", verse 8. With that sentence of death on him, Paul says, we learned "that we should

not **trust** in ourselves but in **God** which raiseth the dead", verse 9. God delivered him out of those circumstances. Yet the apostle reminds us that there is also a present and a future need for God's deliverance. As we look back, perhaps we also find circumstances where, clearly, God has intervened to bring us through some difficulty. Paul assured his readers that we have a God who delivers us in times of need.

Another aspect arises, that of **prayer**. The apostle was able to count on the Corinthians too: "ye also helping together by prayer for us", verse 11. The apostle highly valued the prayers of others for himself. It was this, too, which helped him out of his trials. James 5:16 tells us: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much". Recognising the same truth, Paul writes to the Thessalonians, 5:25, "Brethren pray for us". The apostle believed prayer was of such importance for him that he asks their prayers for him too. Let us also pray today for those who are the Lord's servants for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul's explanations. 1:15-24; 2:1-4.

The apostle intended to come to Corinth before he wrote this letter. Some suggested that he used lightness, verse 17, or fickleness. At one moment he intends to come and the next he changes his mind. Does he say "yes" one moment and "no" the next? Paul rejects this. He points to the way he, with Timothy and Silvanus, preached the Gospel. There is no uncertainty in it. All the promises of God are positive. All our blessings are settled in Christ and sealed, evidenced as final, by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Nor is there any reason for the Corinthian believers to expect anything else from the apostle than a positive answer. The reason he failed to go to Corinth was for their sake, verse 23. Paul desired not to rule over them but rather to stand with them in their joy in doing what was right. He wanted to rejoice with them. 1 Corinthians had caused him grief and tears, because of his great love for them and he had confidence in them that all would turn to joy because they would be true to what was right.

The penitent brother in Christ. 2:5-11.

When Titus returned and met Paul, he obviously gave the apostle a good report. The man who had acted so wrongfully, destroying any testimony he may have had to being a believer as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5, had been disciplined *and* had repented of the wrong. The whole Assembly had acted in the matter; discipline had taken place and the sinful man had been excluded. This was extremely serious for the man for he had nowhere else to go. The apostle points out that it appeared that he was nearing despair, being "swallowed up with overmuch sorrow", verse 7. In 7:10, we read, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of". What was to be done with this man? The apostle points out that in these circumstances, where repentance is true, the Corinthian church should show their love to this man by forgiving him. The effect of discipline has been to bring about repentance and therefore the man should be forgiven publicly and allowed back into the local church. The alternative will be for Satan to gain an advantage and this should not happen, verse 11. Some people argue that, when sin has overtaken someone, which requires the discipline of exclusion, there cannot be any recovery. This Scripture shows the truth to be quite opposite. Furthermore, we read in Galatians 6:1, "If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness..." There should be a place within the church for every believer who has repented of his wrong. We have already referred to Peter's failure earlier. If anyone should be rejected by the Church, many would have included Peter in that list. However, the Lord Himself recovers Peter and replaces him in a leading position. This is wonderful grace. So that repentance comes first, then recovery in order for a believer to take his place among the Lord's people once more. Let us also see that, where the local church forgave, in unity the apostle himself also forgave, verse 10.

Paul's rejoicing. 2:12-17.

During all of this period, the apostle admitted to being unsettled. Another opportunity for him to preach the Gospel had arisen in Troas; certainly an opportunity few would want to miss. Paul, however, could not go on because he was so concerned with the effect of his earlier letter and Titus had not returned with news of the way it had been received. He felt he could do no more than go into Macedonia. What was the result? Paul rejoiced because the Lord was over all and was unerringly leading him in every situation. The apostle delights in "God, which causeth us to triumph in Christ", verse 14. Paul now understood that the work in Corinth had reached a happy conclusion. The Lord is honoured, and "maketh manifest the odour of His knowledge through us in every place", verse 14. In these verses Paul refers to the Roman triumphal processions where captives were led but the victors were prominent. Using the JN Darby translation, "God always leadeth us in triumph in Christ", he says in verse 14.

The letter of Christ. 3:1-6.

A further matter now arises, perhaps suggested by some at Corinth who had problems in their minds in settling the issue. It was usual that when someone travelled to another city, a letter was given to that person to commend them to the local church in that town. This is demonstrated in the case of Apollos in Acts 18:27. What a happy way of introducing another believer to a church where they are not known! There should immediately be a warm welcome. Had some suggested that Paul should do the same? He points out that so many of them were converted through his

ministry that they were in fact “his letter”, “written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart”, verse 3. What a responsibility they had to be a letter which could be read by all men, in recommending both the Lord Jesus Christ and also the apostle to the world! What does this say about each of us and the church we attend? Does the world read Christ in my life, and yours? Thus, for the apostle, there was no need for a letter either way. Both sides knew the other well enough. All who met the Corinthian believers and accepted their testimony would also appreciate the apostle who had led them to the Lord and taught them. Writing to the Philippians Paul says, “that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world”, 2:15.

The apostle now adds that he has no reason to think anything of himself. All he has through God is sufficient for him. God Himself has made Paul a minister of the new covenant “not of the letter (the law in the ten commandments written in stone), but of the Spirit”, verse 6. The commandments could never give life to any man, only the work of the Spirit of God in the heart can bring about salvation through the work of Christ on the cross.

Contrast between the old and new covenants. 3:7-18.

Having described the position into which the believer has been brought through the new covenant, the apostle now contrasts that with the old covenant, brought in by Moses for God’s people, Israel. The differences are stark and show quite clearly that only the second has the effect of giving life. Let us note some of the differences Paul gives.

“The letter (i.e. of the law) killeth, but the Spirit giveth life”, verse 6. What a tremendous contrast! There really is no hope for anyone depending on the law of Moses. Paul tells us that “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight”, Romans 3:20. Then in 8:3, “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh...” Writing to the Galatians, Paul says, “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ”, 3:24. However, when we believe, we have faith in our Lord Jesus based on the new covenant through the cross and that means that “we are no longer under a schoolmaster”, verse 25. We do not need the discipline which of itself can do nothing. We have the real source of all blessing through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The law came with glory. On the second occasion of the giving of the law, Moses’ face shone. But Israel could not look upon that glory and Moses had to veil his face.

The effect upon Israel was that there was a veil on their hearts, their minds were blinded. That would last until it was removed by acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ, verse 14. However, there is a much greater glory with righteousness, that of the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, verses 9-11 and 18. Knowing the Lord Jesus as Saviour brings us to a point where, by faith, “we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour”, Hebrews 2:9. So, with the blessings of the Holy Spirit, we have liberty, especially from the law and its consequences and, “looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, are transformed according to the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Lord the Spirit”, verse 18. What a transformation!

As we close our subject for today let us remind ourselves of the lessons we have learned. These are:

1. God must minister to our hearts first if we are to minister to others.
2. A good minister should never trust in himself but wholly in God.
3. We should be thankful to know of others who pray for the servants of God.
4. The minister should not be fickle, changing his mind, but certain, dependent upon his Lord.
5. Where the discipline of exclusion from the church has to be exercised, always be ready to act in love for recovery where there is true repentance.
6. Readiness to follow the Word of God brings rejoicing to the hearts of true believers.
7. Where the ministry of some in the church has blessed our lives, we become a letter or testimony to them. We have a responsibility to demonstrate that testimony faithfully.
8. Maybe we have never depended on keeping the law to save us from sin. But when we come to know Christ, we develop a vision of His glory which should transform our lives.

May we each one pray that these things may be true of us so that we may become true servants of our Lord Jesus Christ for the glory of His Name.

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