

The Essential Newness of the New Creation - Part 2

by T. Austin-Sparks

We must be willing to die to ourselves and live for Christ, and to be ambassadors of Christ by serving the interests of the Lord.

Scripture: Romans 1:22, 1 Corinthians 10:14, Galatians 5:20, Ephesians 5:5, Colossians 3:5, 1 Peter 4:3

Topics: "Idolatry", "Worship"

Description

The preacher delves into the concept of idolatry, emphasizing extreme admiration or reverence for anything other than God, which is seen as direct opposition to worshiping the Creator. Paul explains the progression of idolatry in Romans 1, where people exchanged the glory of God for images of created beings, leading to impurity and dishonor. In modern times, idols have taken on various forms like sports, celebrities, possessions, and money, highlighting the danger of anything that receives adoration apart from God. The sermon stresses the importance of guarding against idolatry, as warned by Paul and John, and the need to flee from anything that competes with God for our worship.

Transcript

Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:1-21.

"For the love of Christ constraineth us..." (verse 14).

"...that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him..." (verse 15).

Those are the two fragments which will govern our meditation: "...the love of Christ constraineth us...", "...henceforth... unto him". Although these words were penned long after the day when the Apostle was apprehended by Christ Jesus, they clearly reach back to that beginning of things in his own experience, and they form, moreover, a very fitting introduction to his own life; for as we know his life now in a considerable fullness, we are able to see how true it all was to these words. There is a sense in which we can say that these words are a summary of the life of the Apostle Paul. "The love of Christ constraineth us", "not henceforth... unto themselves, but unto him..." Those sentiments very truly govern the life of this man from the day when he met the Lord to the day when he laid down the earthly task.

What was true in his own case he sought to press home upon all others, that it might be equally true of them. He binds others with himself. He says: "...the love of Christ constraineth US...", "because WE thus judge...", "that THEY which live..." Whether he had certain people definitely in mind when he thus wrote, we do not know. Possibly this was not the case, and that his use of the plural here is just the expression of his own great longing that it might be true of all the Lord's people. He knew himself to be so truly governed by that constraining love, and he would not that his own case should be exceptional, but that the passion of every heart might be summed up in the declaration: "the love of Christ constraineth us", "henceforth... unto him."

I feel we are perfectly justified in taking these words as representing the Lord's will for us, as setting before us the standard which the Lord would have to be true in our own case, that we also should say with the same depth of reality: "...the love of Christ constraineth us...", "henceforth... unto him", not unto ourselves.

If you look at the whole paragraph again, you will see that this is related to the Cross on the one hand, and to ambassadorship on the other. Mark the statements: "...one died for all, then were all dead": resultant from that: "...unto him..." - "that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (verse 15, A.V.); "We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ..." (verse 20, R.V.). You notice the significance of that word "therefore" - "We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ..." That is what it means to be "henceforth unto Him", and the place of the Cross here is, quite clearly, the settling once for all of all matters of interest which are apart from the interests of the Lord Jesus. That death with the Lord Jesus was a death in which all our own personal interests, of any and every kind, were for ever buried, and the interests of the Lord Jesus became pre-eminent, pre-dominant, the one passion of our living being "henceforth... unto him..." How? "We are ambassadors... on behalf of Christ." The Cross means that the Lord Jesus becomes the real passion, concern, dominating interest of a life which has been crucified, which has died to all its own interests, BECAUSE OF HIS LOVE. "The love of Christ constraineth us..."

THE CROSS AND TOTAL ABANDONMENT TO THE LORD

This says to us in very clear terms that the Cross represents a total abandonment to Christ. We may have heard that many times. It does not concern me very much how many times I have said it or have heard it. What does concern me is that we should be there. I am tremendously burdened, and there is a strong and deep longing in my heart that what is here should, in spirit and in truth, become true of us all, that we should be able to say with the same depth and reality as did the Apostle: "The love of Christ constraineth us", "henceforth... unto him", "we are ambassadors... on behalf of Christ."

That, then, calls for the same utter abandonment to Him as obtained in the life of this ambassador. That calls for the same meaning of the Cross in our case as in his, complete death to all interests save the Lord's; life only, altogether, for Christ. That is how ambassadors are made. Ambassadors are not officials, appointed on official grounds. The ambassadors of Christ are such because Christ's interests are paramount, are predominant in their hearts; for when we say: "the LOVE of Christ constraineth us", this is a heart matter between the Lord Jesus and ourselves. So that, on the one hand, it is the Cross and total abandonment to the Lord, and, on the other hand, it is

THE CROSS AND A PASSION FOR THE INTERESTS OF THE LORD

Paul was an exemplary ambassador. One thing which he was often found saying was: "I am ready..." Far away from needy saints at Corinth he would write and say: "I am ready to come to you" (2 Corinthians

12:14). He was ready to make long, tiring, difficult and perilous journeys in the interests of Christ in His people. Journeys were more difficult in Paul's day than in ours, and involved a good deal more than do journeys nowadays. But he said, with a real concern for their spiritual wellbeing: "I am ready to come to you."

To far-off Romans he wrote: "I am ready to preach the gospel to you..." (Romans 1:15). From his prison in Rome, where he had fulfilled his readiness to preach to them also, he wrote at the last to his son Timothy: "...I am now ready to be offered..." (2 Timothy 4:6). To those who sought to dissuade him from going into the very lion's mouth at Jerusalem, he said: "I am ready... to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13).

That readiness had a considerable background. If it were put to us we should, in a sense, say that we were ready, but I wonder if we ARE ready! Readiness means more than being willing. Most of us would respond and say: 'Well, if the Lord wants it, I am ready!' But are we ready? What constituted readiness in the case of the Apostle? With all our readiness it is just possible that before we got very far we should be stumbled, we should stop short, and the reasons might be various.

Let us face this quite definitely. It is not necessary to press the question of an ambassadorship to a foreign country on some bit of public service. Ambassadorship relates quite as much to the place where we are in our life now. It relates to the business place. It is wherever we are that our ambassadorship is to hold good. Now then, are we ready? Are we thus ready, with this passion for the interests of the Lord Jesus, so that THERE we are found utterly abandoned to Him to secure those interests? It is strange that while so many are prepared to join with others in an open-air meeting, to preach the Gospel to the unsaved, and are prepared even to stand out on a cold night with a group to do so, the very same work is to be done around them every day in their business place, and they are not touching it. It is exactly the same work. There is something about an open-air ring and a platform and preaching OUT to the unsaved which is more romantic, and in which you can feel far more bold, than when you stand alone in your business place, or place of daily calling. The test comes as to whether it is that aspect of Christian work which is more or less public and official, and puts you in a place of advantage over the others, that draws out your zeal, or whether your passion for Christ is continuous wherever you are. The ambassadorship is not for platforms, for meetings, for public occasions; the ambassadorship relates to all places, all times, because it is constituted not by an appointment, or an invitation to preach, or an official position, but by the love of Christ. "Henceforth... unto HIM"; not on special occasions, but on all occasions. Are we ready?

Paul took charge of the ship's company, and made himself responsible for the spiritual interests of the men on the ship. Wherever he was, in his prison, in his travels, in his journeys, and his sojourns, he was all the time bent upon the interests of the Lord Jesus with concern and eagerness. That was one aspect of his readiness, and is perhaps the one of most general application and challenge.

There are other aspects of readiness. The readiness of Paul was constituted by his having settled, once for all, his own personal, spiritual problems. You never find Paul tied up in the knots of personal spiritual problems, going round, and round, and round, and never getting anywhere because his own spiritual problems are all the while bothering him. Paul had that matter settled at the beginning. He got over that fence, and went away into Arabia, and when Paul said he was ready, it meant that he was at leisure from himself spiritually. No man is ready, in this sense, who is not free from himself spiritually. We do not mean that every question that can ever come to us has been answered, and every problem has been solved, but that we are so utterly abandoned to Christ that we know quite well that, if we go on with the Lord, sooner

or later all those things will solve themselves. Our business is to GO ON, and get free from ourselves spiritually. Those who are self-occupied in a spiritual way are the unready, the unprepared. Why not relegate your 'locking-up' problem to a place where you trust the Lord to deal with it when He pleases, and get on with the business of the Lord and with His interests? Recognize the desperate need that there is spiritually in this world, and give yourself to it? I venture to say you will come back to your pigeon holes and find your problems all solved. You will come back and find that that thing which was laid on the table for the time being has looked after itself and is no longer a problem to you. While you sit there with it all, the Lord's interests are being suspended, and you, in the meantime, are getting nowhere at all. Abandonment to the Lord in this way in faith is the first essential, the Lord's interests becoming the predominant thing, the passion of your heart. There is nothing like that abandonment to the Lord for solving personal problems. Christ becomes the Emancipator when we abandon ourselves to Him. That is readiness.

Another aspect of Paul's readiness was that he had counted the cost. This, like the former question was settled once for all. Paul had sat down and faced it out. He had weighed it all up. He had said to himself: 'Now, I have a name for being such-and-such a man. I have a reputation, I have a position, and I have influence. I am known to have taken the line which I have taken without any reservation at all. Having taken that line in the manner that I have, I have gained a position. That position represents a great deal. I know quite well what all my friends, and all the people who, from my present standpoint, are most worth considering, think about the other line of things, of that course which lies before me now. I know what they think. I know their attitude. I know how they treat people who go that way. I know quite well that it will cost everything. It means reputation, position, influence, all gone, and, more than that, that those who are now for me, who have been on my side so strongly, will become my bitterest foes. I know that it may involve my being cast out of public life and out of domestic life. I know quite well that what they did to Jesus of Nazareth they will not hesitate to do to me, but my life goes with this.' He had weighed it all up from every standpoint, put it all in the balances, and settled it once for all. 'If I take this course, I have nothing to expect from this world but complete antagonism. From all my friends I have nothing to expect but the loss of ALL things.' That is how Paul put it. He had settled the cost, so that later on, when things began to work out as he had anticipated, he was not stumbled in his course. He did not come to a standstill in order to go over the whole matter again. He went on. All those matters had been dealt with, and were behind him. So often we are arrested because we come up against the cost of things, the price to be paid, and we find that we are not ready for that. "I am ready to die..."; "I am ready to preach..."; "I am ready to go..."; "I am already being offered, and the last drops of my sacrifice are falling." (That is the literal translation of the words to Timothy.) Paul pictures himself as a drink-offering being poured out for his Christ. That is abandonment to Christ. That is passion for Christ's interests. That is the meaning of the Cross - "henceforth... unto him..." Dead to self, and all else.

This is a challenge to us. Are we ready? Are we so detached from self, the world, and attached to Him by His love, that His interests really are the dominating interests of our life all the time? The Lord needs more men and women like this. Have you settled down to a more or less ordinary kind of Christian life? Is there a going on from day to day, and week to week, and month to month, and perhaps from year to year, with none of this real passion in our relationship to the Lord Jesus for the seeking of His interests here in this world? Are you watching closely the interests of your Lord every day? Are you making sacrifice for those interests? Yes, it may break in even upon your home life. Sacred as home life may be, if the Lord's interests should challenge even that, are you prepared - nay, not only prepared, but ready in this positive sense? I do not mean that you will never feel the matter press upon you. I have no doubt that Paul very

often felt the drain, the weariness, the cost, but there was never any question, never any hesitation, as to what course was to be taken. "I am ready...!" Oh, do hear the Lord, the Spirit's call to your heart for this abandonment of the true ambassador of Jesus Christ! Do not regard ambassadorship as being for those special people who go out on special commissions.

We started by pointing out that Paul sought to bring the whole company of believers into this state of concern with himself. To these Corinthian believers he said: "...we beseech..."; 'we entreat'. We are all called into this position as ambassadors. Paul had a longing to see the interests of the Lord Jesus served at all times.

Are you ready to let your home go somewhat if His interests call? Are you ready to let your worldly prospects go if His interests call? Are you willing, in following out His interests, to lose the good opinion of your friends, the esteem of others, your reputation, the loss of everything, so long as the Lord's interests are served? Are you holding everything here in this world, EVERYTHING - position and everything else - in the interests of the Lord? Are you sure that you are using all that you have for the Lord? Are you using your home? Are you using your business opportunity? Are you using your means? Is everything for Him?

I am aware that this is nothing more than an appeal to your hearts. There is not a great deal of profound teaching here, but I feel this is what is needed: a people of this sort who really do and can say, with a true, conforming background: "The love of Christ constraineth"! No longer unto ourselves, but unto HIM! "We are ambassadors... of Christ...!" Those who stay at home, and continue in business and in the home life should not be any the less ambassadors than those who go abroad. There ought to be in us the spirit of: "I am ready to preach...", "I am ready to go...", "I am ready to die..." 'I am ready in this full sense of readiness, with the result that everything is held so loosely that it will not be able to keep me back from serving the Lord's interests.' Everything is regarded solely in the light of how it can serve the Lord, and if it cannot serve the Lord, then we have no personal interest in it. If we are obliged to be in any given thing as in this world, well and good, but our hearts are not in THAT for any personal interests at all. Our hearts will only have to be in it in so far as it is our duty. We will do what is our duty with all our might, but the connection must serve the interests of the Lord Jesus up to the hilt, as far as that is possible.

That is the attitude toward life which is called for. It is possible that this spirit, this element, this real concern and passion for the Lord, may have dropped out of the lives of many.

Ambassadors are not ambassadors because they have been appointed, but because "the love of Christ constraineth". We are not ambassadors of churches, congregations or assemblies; we are ambassadors of Christ. The Lord write this in our hearts!

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