

The Ministry of the Church - Part 2

by T. Austin-Sparks

The ministry of the church is the influence and effect of the Lord's people in the world, and it is produced through suffering, which allows us to experience the power of resurrection.

Duration: 38:04

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16, Acts 13:49, 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 2 Corinthians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 6:1, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 4:10-11

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by sharing a personal experience of intense suffering in Asia. He emphasizes that suffering is a crucial aspect of ministry and testimony, as it is through suffering that we can truly understand and participate in the sufferings of Christ. The speaker uses the analogy of vine dressing to illustrate how suffering involves being cut back and stripped, leading to a greater yield of fruit. He concludes by highlighting the purpose of suffering, which is to teach us not to trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.

Transcript

The key words to our time of fellowship these days is in the second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 1, and working together with him. Workers, together with God. And chapter 4, verse 1, therefore, having this ministry.

And we have intimated that the message at this time relates to the ministry of the Lord's people. That is, the ministry of the Church. Whether it be the Church in general, or the Church in local communions.

It is the ministry to which the Lord's people, both individually and collectively, are called. You will remember that in another letter, the same writer, spoke about the gifts given by the Ascended Lord in the Church. Some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, teachers, for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministry.

The end of all the divine activities now is that the Church shall be a ministering instrument and vessel of the Ascended Lord. Of course, we have to get our minds clear and adjusted over that word ministry. For it does not only mean, and very largely, it does not mean at all going about with a Bible in your hand and giving addresses anywhere.

That may be a form of ministry. Some have. But ministry is a very comprehensive thing.

And if I were to put it into a phrase, I should say this, the influence and effect of the Lord's people being here in this world. And that effect and influence can be in very many different ways. What we are meant to for the Lord by being here.

What the world knows by our being here. And what other believers know by our being here. We are not, in a spiritual sense, at any rate, non-entities.

People who don't exist. That's the meaning of that word. Non-entities.

No existence. In the Lord Jesus, we are not to be as though we did not exist. Very much to the contrary.

We do very much exist. And it ought to be realized that we exist. Not as in our own self-importance or self-sufficiency, but just being here in our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Now that is a general statement or definition of ministry. It may work out in particular ways, but this is the ministry of the church. Now to be here, to be in deal, or to be in any other place where you may be related to the Lord's people by the will of God, to be there as not non-entities, but as entities, living entities, is in itself something without any preaching, without any platform.

The Apostle says in two connections, and I believe it was true in more than the two, that through them, through them, the word sounded out into all the region. And that was true of the Lord Jesus. His name went out throughout all the region.

Something was taken note of. People knew that they existed. God forbid that we should be in any place and people not know of our existence in the spiritual way.

Now you know what I mean when I'm talking about the ministry of the church. And having said that, I hope it's got home, that you are meeting the challenge, because I said yesterday, right at the beginning, this letter, this second letter, is so practical that we have to meet a challenge from the very beginning to the end. Because it is the letter of ministry.

I think we shall learn a lot about the nature of the ministry as we go on, but it is the great challenge to the spiritual effectiveness of the Lord's people as being in this world. Now in Corinth, in Corinth, come about a state of things spiritually where they lost their testimony in the world. Their ministry to the world had become neutralized, overshadowed, and they were no longer a spiritual power in that great city.

Until something happened between the two letters, that we shall come again, and then a second or a third letter, it may be, this letter could be written on the whole matter of ministry. Well now, we remind ourselves of the content of this first chapter again. We ought to read it all, but there isn't time to do that.

I had a feeling last night that you would want to go home and read the chapter again very carefully. You didn't? Well I suggest that you do. Repeatedly read this first chapter because it is the essence and summary of all that follows.

All that is in the whole letter to the end is in some way implied or touched upon in this first chapter. And we spent our first hour on this first feature of ministry. This chapter is so full of this word suffering.

Suffering. And the sufferings. Accompanied by the consolation.

And we summed it all out by saying that there is no real effectual ministry or testimony that does not spring out of suffering of some kind, in some way. The sufferings of Christ. That very phrase, the suffering of Christ, there is more in it than a phrase.

Contemplate the sufferings of Christ. I don't mean the crucifixion. I don't even mean the nails in hands and feet, horns on his head.

These are the sufferings that are made so much of, for instance, in Rome and in other realms. That is not what we refer to. You know, very terrible things have been said about that.

I remember at the beginning of the First World War, hearing a famous preacher from America preach in the City Temple in London. And he said, Many a British soldier has put up a better show than Jesus Christ did when he was crucified. Dwelling, if that were true, doubtful it's true.

However, dwelling wholly upon the physical aspect of things. If you do, well, you might make comparisons like that. However, that is not the meaning of the sufferings of Christ.

They are much deeper than that. And no man in all history, soldier or other, has ever touched the real sufferings. Those vicarious, representative sufferings.

God forsakenness in full consciousness. Well, leave that. But this phrase, the sufferings of Christ.

What immensely fruitful sufferings they were. No suffering, individual or cumulative, no suffering has ever borne the fruit that his sufferings have borne. We hear this morning, dwelling upon the fruit of his sufferings.

All our limited, our microscopic apprehension of the meaning of his shed blood, his broken body. However small it is, makes us, individuals, feel, oh, how immensely efficacious and virtuous were his sufferings. If only my soul has been redeemed and saved and secured unto eternal glory, forever and ever, those sufferings were not in vain.

They were great sufferings. No man could ever do that. When you gather a great multitude which no man can number, ten thousand times, ten thousand and thousands of thousands, language beggared to comprehend.

See them standing in the virtue of the blood of the Lamb, the fruit of his suffering. His sufferings were fruitful. Now that is the point again.

The apostle is saying that he, he was privileged to share the sufferings of Christ. And the church, even the church at Corinth. The church at Corinth, as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us.

What is the point? That the values, the values of suffering may be produced. The wine from the winepress should give new life, minister life. The point here is, as you know, the emphasis here is upon this thing.

Not the sufferings in themselves, but the value, the profit, the gain of those sufferings, the fruit of those sufferings. That is what the apostle is talking about. And of course the letter itself is set right in that, as we shall see in a minute.

Well, for these few minutes we can dwell upon the afflictions of Christ, or the sufferings of Christ, which abound unto his people for the sake of their ministry. To make us effectual and fruitful in ministrations to

others. The effect of our lives.

I think we have to bow our heads in shame that so often, more often than not, our sufferings are allowed to turn us in upon ourselves and make us miserable in look and appearance and heavy in our contact with other people. Just the reverse of ministering life. Isn't that true? Well, if we do bow before that, if we go down before that charge, let us realize that that is why the Lord is speaking to us at this time about this matter.

Try to help us to get on our feet and take another view of the sufferings, the afflictions of Christ which abound unto us. And see that in the Lord's meaning and intention, seeing it is in union with himself, in his intention, it is that our ministry, our testimony, our influence here in this world, should be a fruitful one and a more fruitful one. Now the apostle introduces, right at the heart of this opening part of his letter, he introduces a great experience through which he had passed in this way.

I would not have you ignorant of the things which befell us in Asia. I would not have you ignorant of the things which befell us in Asia that we were weighed down exceedingly beyond our power in so much that we despaired even of life. I appalled you of saying something.

You, you, you despaired? Yea, verily it is. We ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves. Now I said this first chapter is a kind of summary of the whole.

If you go on through the letter, you will come on a great deal more like that, which we may refer to at some other point, but he will list, tabulate the many, many sufferings that came into his life and how many and how terrible they were. But here he introduces the whole range of suffering with this one instance and incident in Asia. This is suffering, you know, this is intense suffering, is it not? Weighed down exceedingly, in excess, beyond our power.

Perhaps some of you at some time have had to say, Lord, it is beyond me, Lord, beyond my power, it is beyond my measure of grace. I just cannot stand any more. Well, that was poor.

Beyond our power, in so much that we despaired even of life. We had the sentence. It was as though we heard the sentence passed.

It is dead. The end has come. Now, that is only half the verse.

But that is the setting of what follows. And a mighty, mighty word is the next. We had the sentence of death within ourselves.

There are few mightier words than the next one. That, which means in order that. All this, all this, can it be? Yes, all this, that, with a definite object, a definite purpose, a definite meaning in it all, that, we should not trust in ourselves.

But in God, who raiseth the dead. Well, there wasn't much left to trust in anyway, was there? And then the great tunnel round the corner, which you thought in our modern language was round the bend, round the corner. But, God, who raiseth the dead.

What then was the divine thought and object in these afflictions of Christ, so deep, so terrible? What was he working toward? What was he meaning at this time? And the context is so tremendously impressive. Well, to answer the question first, it was all intended by the Lord to bring into a new knowledge of the

power of his resurrection. That is where your ministry is going, to take its rise and have its fruit.

A new knowledge in our own selves, as we have known in ourselves the sentence of death, to know in ourselves, in a new way, in a new measure, God, who raiseth the dead. And you can put all the eleven disciples right into this, when Christ had died. That for them was the sentence of death within themselves.

And they were scattered. And if there was one more than another amongst them who would say, I had the sentence of death in myself, it was Peter. It's almost a worn out, threadbare statement and idea, but there's a depth in it that would keep us from making it light and familiar.

Go to my disciples. Doesn't want much imagination. Find that group.

The one sent, go to my disciples, the one arriving amongst the group and say, I have a message from the Lord. He's alive. I have a message from the Lord to you.

He's told me to come to speak to you. And Peter, he specially mentioned you. What about Peter? He mentioned me? He mentioned me? Are you speaking the truth? Do you mean it? He really picked me out and said that you were to say it to me as well as in a general way you were to make it personal to me.

That was, of course, in the Lord's knowledge very necessary. But poor Peter, as I've said, if ever a man felt the sentence of death in himself, it was Peter at that time. They were all there.

All there. And all ministry was impossible until that moment. There'll be no New Testament.

No New Testament, no book of the Acts and nothing at all of our New Testament until they knew that he was risen and knew it in themselves. The New Testament, you see, springs out of the resurrection. It's based upon it.

The message to the world was that all ministry springs from first the sentence of death and then the knowledge of him in the power of his resurrection. And this is not just history of long ago. This is something which is continuous, repeated again and again in the history of the Church and of individual Christians.

For it's in this letter, you know, the Apostle will speak about that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh, always bearing about the dying of the Lord Jesus. The life of the Lord Jesus should also be manifested. Always, always, everywhere, repeated.

Well, Paul had known the risen Lord in a mighty way at the beginning of his Christian life, but this is long after in Asia. And I think we would be right in saying it's gone more deeply than ever in Asia. Have I said enough or too much to say that the fruit of the afflictions of Christ for testimony, for ministry, for influence, for effect, for impact, for making us significant amongst men in this world.

The fruit of the afflictions of Christ is that we are the embodiment of the power of his resurrection. That when we have more than once come to the place where everything said it's the end, this is the end, we're still here and going on. That's happened many times.

Now, you're familiar with words like that. But this is, this is the very thing, isn't it? It's real. It's practical indeed.

So that all ministry comes out of resurrection is the fruit of suffering. Did not the Lord say this in a parable, which could only really be understood after his resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit, about the vine and the branches. I think we dwell a lot upon the vine, and rightly so, and upon the branches, and rightly so, but let us dwell a little more upon the vine dresser and the knife in his hand.

Watch him. Now here is this thing spreading itself, showing itself in every way, growing perhaps in its beauty and glory, and then the knife comes down. Off comes this and off comes that.

This and that and another thing is shed. Branches be wrapped one thing after another until it's cut right back to the very quick of its bleeding at every point. So that is the truth about vine dressing, isn't it? You go where the vines are and see the preparation for the next, the next yield of the grapes.

When the dresser has done, you wonder if ever anything will survive at all, if there's a future for that vine. It's cut back and down. So much has been taken away.

That is the principle, you see. Here, cut, bleeding, suffering and anguish stripped the rest. This thing and that thing, which was our glory, which was our life, and the Lord Jesus said that, this word again, that it may bring forth more fruit and better fruit.

No more, need be said. Now, to keep to reality, and we must keep to reality, as I last night said, there's this other word, consolation. Consolation, which is running parallel all the time with the sufferings, with the afflictions.

Is it not the greatest consolation when we come into a new experience of the power of his resurrection? Is there anything better than that? When we had despair and gone beyond our measure and then find that that's not the end after all, but it's not only just survival and going on in our existence, but there's something more. Something fuller. Something richer.

Now, I said the setting of this is itself the great illumination. Read the first letter to the Corinthians. There is no document in the Bible so terrible as that letter.

And there are some terrible ones. Terrible here because of all that they had had. The two years' ministry of the Apostle Paul, day and night with them.

All that such a man had to give them for two years, concentrated, and apparently a very real experience with wonderful activities and operations of the Holy Spirit and gifts of the Holy Spirit. And after the two years, the Apostle leaving them for four or five years. And then, way up there, some household slaves, Christian slaves arrive.

They of the household of Chloe and tell the Apostle what's happened in Corinth. The awful spiritual decline, breakdown. This awful state of things.

It is declared unto me, he says, by them of the household of Chloe. And then he goes on, unfolding the story of this. There are divisions among you.

Some of you go to the worldly courts to fight out your case against your own brethren in the church. You get your rights. And on he goes until he reaches the deepest depths.

And there is even incest amongst you. And the church condones it. This man goes down.

For Paul loved Corinth. He loved Corinth, that is, the church. He said with tears, day and night, drawn out on their behalf.

And he had this report. Devastating to the man. He called Timothy away to Corinth.

Hurry off to Corinth. See if this is all true. See if it is all true.

And do what you can to straighten it out, put it right. And Timothy reported, it's all true, but I'm afraid it's worse than it has been reported. Holy Napolis, you go.

Titus, you go. Perhaps Timothy, they don't take sufficient notice of him being young. You go.

See what you can do. And the report was just as bad as anything. And Paul at that time left Ephesus and went to Troas and told Timothy to meet him there in the hope that Timothy would have some kind of better, better account to give.

He went to Troas. He said the door was open to me at Troas. Preached the word, but I had no rest in my spirit because I found not Timothy.

Timothy had been delayed, not arrived. The man's heart was breaking and he had to leave an open door for the gospel and go into Macedonia. But the report was confound.

And he wrote his first letter. What a letter it is. And then, as many believed, he wrote a second.

I can't confirm that, of course, prove it, which was lost. If that is true, I think that was in the providence of God that it was lost. Or it must have been a devastating letter if the things in the second letter, this second one here, really applied to his letter.

Terrible things resulted. He smashed them up completely with that second letter if it was read. Well, I'm glad it doesn't exist in the New Testament.

But then, something did happen. Oh, yes, it went home. And you notice how in the second letter he speaks, oh, what repentance, what tears, what brokenness, what humbling of yourself, what apologizing, what seeking forgiveness.

Yes. Death and a corner turned. This is the consolation he's speaking about now, the resurrection in Corinth.

And while all the things that had happened were not cured, as this letter will show, there's still some of them, nevertheless, the situation, the general situation has turned. And the power of resurrection has come in. And the apostle here is saying, yes, you have been where I've been.

We have gone through it together, to despair, beyond our endurance, sentence of death, we've all been in it together. And you and I are now together in the power of his resurrection, God who raised up the dead. You see the very practical setting and background of this teaching.

And from that time, the apostle will open up the whole matter of ministry. He could never have done that before with Corinth. Ministry, no, never for such a church, in such a state.

Oh, all gone. Now, as I have said, the most wonderful document on the church's ministry, church's ministry, is the second letter, so-called, to the Corinthians. And what a letter it is on ministry.

We haven't got there only at the beginning, so far. But I trust we are able to draw something from this. Many of the Lord's people are knowing great suffering.

Fellowship of his suffering, the afflictions of Christ, deep trials, perhaps not in the same form as the apostle Paul, or even the Corinthian church. But we are in days when the Lord's people are knowing a great heaviness of trial, of faith, going through deep waters, often perplexed, pressed, pursued, cast down, sometimes to despair. Let us take the Lord's word to heart.

He doesn't mean all this to be the end. His meaning inside of it all is debt. Debt.

Not trusting in ourselves, we should trust in God who raiseth the debt.

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