

# The Ministry of the Church - Part 3

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon explores the transformative power of the Spirit in the ministry of the Church, contrasting it with the limitations of the Old Testament law.*

**Duration:** 39:05

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 3:7

**Topics:** "Church"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the limitations of human capacity in understanding the word of God. He uses the example of the apostle Paul groaning under the constraint of his disciples' spiritual immaturity. The speaker emphasizes that there is so much more that the Lord wants to reveal to us, but our limited capacity hinders us from fully grasping it. He encourages the audience to seek a deeper understanding of the scriptures and to allow the Holy Spirit to liberate them from their spiritual limitations.

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## Transcript

Will you now please turn to the word in the second letter to the Corinthians at chapter 3. Are we beginning again to commend ourselves, or need we, as do some epistles of commendation to you or from you? Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men. Being made manifest, ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh. And such confidence have we through Christ to God worth, not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account anything as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit.

For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face, which glory was passing away, how shall not rather the ministration of the spirit be with glory? Or if the ministration of condemnation is glory, much rather doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. For verily that which hath been made glorious hath not been made glorious in this respect by reason of the glory that surpasseth.

For that which is, that which passeth away was with glory, much more that which remaineth is in glory. Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness of speech, and are not as Moses, who put a veil upon his face, that the children of Israel should not look steadfastly on the end of that which was passing away. But their minds were hardened.

For until this very day, at the reading of the old covenant, the same veil remaineth unlifted, which veil is done away in Christ. But unto this day, whensoever Moses is read, a veil lieth upon the heart. But whensoever it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Now the Lord is the spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 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, as we have been seeing this whole second letter to the Corinthians, has to do with the matter of the ministry of the Lord's people.

You will have noticed in this chapter that word ministrations and ministry used repeatedly. It's the whole question and matter of ministering and ministering Christ. And you will also have noticed that this ministry is the ministry of glory.

That word can be underlined for it occurs so many times here in this part of the letter. It is the ministry of glory, which is the ministry entrusted to the Lord's people. But that is a statement, may not help you very far as it is so stated.

We need to get inside of this section, see what that really means. It's a very full section, this chapter three and part of chapter four. Indeed it goes right on.

And it has to be divided into its several phases. And we will this afternoon just look at and consider the first of these phases, in what we may call the contrasted ministry. That is the contrast between the ministry of Moses and the ministry of Christ, or the ministry of the Spirit.

The apostle here, in his very full rich knowledge of the Old Testament, which was his only Bible, takes a great deal from the Old Testament in this letter. And here in this matter of ministry as he begins to get more deeply and fully into it, he lifts this Old Testament incident out and makes it the ground of explaining the real nature of the New Testament ministry. The ministry of the New Testament church.

This incident of Moses going up into the mountain and into the presence of God and receiving the law for the people of God and coming down from the mountain with the radiance of God's presence and God's glory upon his face. As he came down to the camp, that glory was so strong that the people could not, it says, twice steadfastly look upon his face. They took a glance.

They couldn't hold their eyes in the direction of Moses. They could not endure it. It says they could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses because of the glory.

And so when Moses entered upon the ministry of preaching and expounding the word of God, because the people were unable to look, he put a veil over his face and from behind the veil he read the word of God. Paul takes hold of that and oh how he uses the principle that is there to these Corinthians. He uses it in the first letter and he uses it here by way of explanation, by way of showing what true ministry is for the And he, the apostle, the apostle, gathers his all in this comprehensive statement.

The veil still rests upon their hearts to this day, to this day, after the centuries since that incident, right up to now, the veil still rests upon their heart. Now, without dealing with all the details that Paul mentions about the incident, and it's not all easy to understand, let us get right to the principle that is here. Because, you see, what Paul means or shows to be meant by this veil is something more than just the literal thing.

It touches upon a very deep and real thing in human life because that veil is carried over into the New Testament, into the Gospels, and it's carried out to Corinth and is found in Corinth. The veil is represented by all the types and the symbols and the forms and all the means employed by God in the Old Testament as means of representing spiritual realities, spiritual truth, but not being such themselves. These figures and types and symbols of the Old Testament with which we are so familiar, which God employed, are just the Old Testament parables holding the same principle as the parables of the Lord Jesus.

And you know, the disciples said to Jesus, after his long discourse on the parables, why do you always speak to them in parables? Why do you always speak to them in parables? He said, it is not given to them to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. It is not given to them to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. What lies behind the veil of symbols and types and figures and forms and outward expressions of God's thought? What lies behind it? The meaning of things.

The real spiritual meaning of things. And there are two worlds between the things and their meaning. There is just as true in Christianity as in Judaism.

Two different worlds between things said, stated, presented objectively between them and what they really mean as the spiritual thoughts of God. So the apostle gives us a collection of negatives. You notice? Again, yes.

Not, not, not, he says three times. Not with ink. Not on stone.

Not the letter. There the veil. There the veil.

Ink, stone, letter. The veil. And he says, not that now.

Not that now. That's not the thing. But, but, but what? Not ink, but the spirit of the living God.

All the difference. Not stone tables, but hearts, which are hearts of flesh. Not the letter, the verbal statement, but the spirit.

Tremendous contrast. And these are the contrasts in the ministry of Moses and the ministry of believers in this dispensation. It's a contrasted ministry with a great difference.

When it comes to the spirit, the veil is taken away. Symbols are God, finished with. Served their purpose.

Led us to no real end. Types, yes, all right. Types, figures, very interesting.

And you will still, still spend many days and hours on the tabernacle in the wilderness and all such things, you know. Very interesting, almost fascinating. Figures, types, symbols, forms, all that Old Testament system and economy, when it turns to the spirit, it's gone.

It's not, not, not. Now what is it? The spirit of the living God doing something inside, which it never did then. None of those things did anything inside, did they? No, no symbol, no type, no form ever did anything inwardly.

But now it turns to the spirit, the spirit of the living God, and from the outside it enters in. And by the entering in, the ministry of the glory begins. Really there was little or no glory, you know, in all that performance and paraphernalia and whatnot in the Old Testament system.

It was something done, something carried out, a daily routine, something gone through almost with monotony, through week after week and year after year and decade after decade. Repetition, repetition, repetition. And so far as ultimate effect is concerned, vain repetition, vain repetition.

And what the New Testament calls dead works. All those, yes, dead works. That is, they never meant real life.

They've changed over now. Tremendous change has taken place with the spirit of the living God. And now, not dead works, not monotonous routine in religious rituals and ordinances, but now real life, the livingness of things.

Everything lives, everything lives. And it is the livingness which is the glory. Look into your New Testament and you'll find those two things are linked together, glory and life, life and glory.

You come to the end of your New Testament, the end of the book of the Revelation, you find these two things again in representation, in principle are represented. A new Jerusalem, holy city, coming down from God out of heaven, having the glory of God in the midst of the street thereof and on either side the tree of life. The river of the water of life and the tree of life.

See, life and glory are the ultimate things. The glory is by the life, and the life is the glory, and that's the ministry. It's not some radiant that lights upon us, countenance or otherwise, though the inner life does make a difference, even in those matters, doesn't it? But that is not the point.

The glory is the livingness of the church, the livingness of believers. They are not just ritualists, they are not just ceremonialists, they are not just sacramentarians, they are living ones. And their presence is the great contrast between life and death.

Challenge, I said, the book is full of challenges. It is, it's so practical. The test and proof that we have this ministry is that we, like the love of Jesus when he was here, we are a contrast to the dead conditions around us in people and things.

Isn't it sad that so many Christians, professing Christians, and some perhaps really saved Christians, are so little a contrast to their environment and to their surroundings and to the people of the world, because, because they are toying with and flirting with things of the world, their contrast is dissolved. Now, that's exactly what happened at Corinth in the first instance, during those four or five years after the apostle left them. They lost their testimony in the world, their impact upon the world.

The world had made its own inroads into the church, as you know from the first letter of the first chapters, and glorying in worldly wisdom, glory in the world's ideas of power, and so on. Because the world had made its inroads into their lives, they had lost their impact upon the world. The registration of livingness, in a sense, that livingness is found nowhere else.

And you see, because, because, during so many centuries, what are called the dark ages and medievalism, the church lost her power, her light, her impact, a very great deal today, in order to recover that, is by means of introducing things which are called life, which are not life at all. Life, life. They know that it's life that's wanted, that's needed.

So, it's another kind of life. It's not true life. The true life of Jesus Christ needs no classics.

It does not need entertainments, and worldly attractions, and a hundred and one things to try and give an impression of life. It does not need it. The Lord Jesus is really present.

The power of the Holy Spirit and the word of the Lord is present in richness, and the vein is renewed, so that the testimony of his life is in evidence. People will know it, and if they are seeking, they'll know where to go for it, and they'll be there. I do not believe that it is necessary to have all these other substitutes for life in order to fill a place with people.

Not at all. Well, you see, it's the ministry, or ministrations, of life which is the glory, and which is the true ministry of the Lord's people, and of the companies of the Lord's people, and should be of the church, universal, the veil removed. Christ present.

Christ unveiled in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what Paul is saying, and two things will result from that. We shall be changed.

We shall be changed. We Christians shall be changed. Not as by conversion, now we are Christians, but from glory to glory.

We have a bit of it. A Christian life started with glory, didn't it? Oh, what a sad thing it is that we Christians find ourselves singing, and we realize what we're singing or not. Where is the blessedness I knew when first I sought the Lord? Where is the soul refreshing due of Jesus and his word? Return, O holy God, return.

We'll sing it. Has the original glory really gone, to be entreated to return? Well, we had it. The Corinthians had it, and the doubt seemed to have flown.

What we are reading now is the return, and he's saying there was glory. There is a glory which is the lot of a true child of God, but there can be from glory to glory. We beholding are being changed into the same image, from glory to glory.

So the ministry is a matter of going on, isn't it? Not starting and stopping, having and losing. The ministry's power calls for a going on, and that in the contemplation of the Lord by the aid of the Holy Spirit. That's another phase which we'll leave till later.

Here we are simply stating what the word of God through the apostle is telling us as to the nature of our ministry. Now just a word, further word, of this matter of the veil, and the removal of the veil. He's indicated certain things that it means, but what does it mean intrusively? Well, the presence of the veil speaks loudly, audibly, strongly a spiritual incapacity.

Limitation of spiritual capacity, doesn't it? They could not look steadfastly. They could not. There was an embargo.

There was a limitation. There was a lack of capacity for looking, for seeing. Now Paul says unto this day that was not only true of Israel in the wilderness at Sinai, that was true of Israel in the days of the Lord Jesus.

And sadly, something to take note of, it was true of the disciples in the days of his flesh. Did he not say, I have many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now. How be it? How be it? That will not always exist when he, the spirit of truth, is come.

But now, oh I have so much that I would like to say. So much that would be for your good. So much of heavenly value.

I have many, but you cannot bear them. Isn't that limited capacity? That's terrible. The Lord has so much more than ever we have seen to show us.

However much we have seen or received, the limit has not been reached by any means. The Lord groaned because of that limitation imposed upon him by their lack of capacity. And he cried, I came to scatter fire on the earth, but how am I straightened until it be accomplished.

Oh that it were all ready and coming. He's only saying in effect and meaning, oh that these limitations of capacity in my men were removed. What a great thing it would be when I'm able to give them all that I've got.

And they can take it. Now here in Corinth you have the exact situation again. First letter.

Here is Paul groaning and groaning under this straightness. And he says, I could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. I fed you with milk, not with meat, for ye are not yet able.

Same word, same cause. Whether Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews or not, we'll not argue. But there you have the same thing in chapter four.

When by reason of the time you ought to be teachers, you have need that someone teach you the rudiments. Time has long passed for you to be taught rudiments. You ought to be teaching yourself, but it's not so.

You even now, after all, have need that someone teach you the rudiments. He cries, let us go on, not laying again the foundation of first principle. First principle, let us go on to full growth.

You see this question of limitation of spiritual capacity. That's the principle of all of the veil. Capacity for seeing not things, but their meaning.

Not the letter, but the meaning of the letter. Many, many Christians have had this experience. They've known the letter.

They've known the verbal statements of the Bible. They've heard them said again and again, preached again and again. They've read them, these things, and then the day has come, and like a flash their eyes have been, my, I never saw that before.

And now it's all alive. When your Bible, the whole Bible gets like that, you know, it's very wonderful, isn't it? The veil. Is our limited spiritual capacity for comprehending and grasping the real meaning of the Lord in the things that he has said, given us.

Their intrinsic values. When we get those, my, something happens to us. We are liberated.

It is where the spirit of the Lord is, or where the Lord is the spirit. There's liberty. There's a liberation which comes by suddenly seeing what we never saw to be the meaning of that before.

You know what I'm talking about? It is very true. Very true. Spiritual capacity.

Though the Corinthians in the first instance were not able. Were not able. They hadn't got the capacity.

Said, I could not speak to you. That's understood. In this letter, there's a wonderful unveiling of the hidden meaning of things.

He's using the Old Testament, but he's not just preaching it as Old Testament. He's giving us the meaning. The meaning of the veil and the meaning of the removal of the veil.

And a lot of other things are going to follow from the Old Testament in which he gives us the meaning. The veil removed, capacity created and enlarged. And what a challenge this is to the ministerial life, isn't it? For he is saying this, we have this ministry.

This is the ministry. For he is saying this, we have this ministry. This is the ministry of something that has been made real in our own hearts.

As real as things were to that man born blind when the Lord gave him his sight. He could say, I was blind, but now I see. What a new world was opened to him.

And you know, you can argue with anybody like that as long as you like. Even the scribes and the Pharisees would come and argue with him, but you cannot undo that. And you cannot move him from that.

The last argument is not whether your theology or interpretation is the final word. My experience of the Lord is the final word. What the Lord has done in my life, that's the final word.

And that is my testimony. That is my ministry. Oh, that all preaching were of that kind, born out of something done within.

Now you see, you don't have to go to college and be ordained for this. You don't have to have a society to make a minister of you. You don't have to put on any special kind of dress.

You're a minister in very truth. You can't help being a minister. You may, through many a discouragement and a hard time, say I'm not minister again, but you'll be ministering again before very long.

Don't make a mistake about it. You'll be at it again. It will be like the one who said, while I am used, the fire burned.

Then I opened my mouth. Can't help it if it's like this. Well, this sounds very simple again and elementary, but do we not need such words today? And do we not really need enlargement of spiritual capacity? We do.

We do. If we will come the Lord's way, we'll have it. And that is why the Apostle in the Spirit introduced this whole matter of ministry with the afflictions of Christ.

There are the words he used, the sufferings of Christ, the afflictions of Christ. He was saying in other words and more words, if you go the way of the cross, you'll come the way of enlargement of spiritual capacity. The cross in its work has a wonderful way of breaking us open, of removing barriers, giving us and leading us to an open heaven.

If we will come this way, which we call the way of the cross, that's the way of spiritual capacity. Of course, we can put that to the test. We know quite well, very well, that those who have never suffered or suffered very little haven't got much to give.

They haven't got much to say to us, and we always know it. We always know it. But we do know that if there's anything that is of real value to us, that comes from some deep experience, that comes through a vessel of some experience of the cross.

Well, I think we'll leave it there for the present. We'll have some more things here. The apostle tells us what is the nature of the ministry.

This is the ministry which is the ministry of the glory. It's the ministry of created and enlarged spiritual capacity for grasping meanings, spiritual meanings. The inner thoughts of God, they become life to us, life in us, and life through us to others.

You want to see that? You see?

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