

## THE MINISTER AND THE MINISTRY

Verse 14 of 2 Corinthians 2 brings into view the triumphal procession of the victorious war-lord as he moves from place to place with his captives behind him, celebrating at many points his victory and using them for the purpose of evidence as to his victory. But in the procession are those who carry vessels of incense. And the incense being diffused everywhere speaks in two ways to two different classes of people.

There are some who are going to celebrate this day of victory by being slain. It was a custom to hold certain notorious or distinguished captives in bondage until the day of the great celebration of the victory. That day was marked by their being slain.

On the other hand, there were those who were appointed to be released as a distinguishing mark of the day.

To the one the incense brought death near and made them know that their hour had come. To the other the same incense made known that the hour of emancipation, of liberation, was drawing near. The same incense proclaimed death and life, life and death.

In the second part of the picture the Apostle Paul himself passes from the first, where he had been viewing himself as one of those prisoners, led in the triumph as procession, as an object of public exhibition as to the triumph of the great Warrior. He has been himself as in the train of the triumph of the Lord, being on full view as a demonstration of the greatness of that victory.

Now he passes himself into the second part and takes the place of an incense bearer in the procession, and says that he passes on through the world bearing incense. That incense is saying two things, having two effects, speaking to two different classes of people. It relates to life and death.

But the Apostle carries that thing inward, and he does not regard himself as simply carrying a censor of incense. He regards himself as that vessel and as—in a strange, deep, inward way, so as to become a very part of his own being—the incense itself. He thinks of himself as being, not only the giver forth of the sweet savor but that sweet savor itself, that he is the means by which this effect is registered upon these two different classes of people.

In that presentation of the servant of the Lord there is a deep, strong and solemn word for all of us who stand in that position as the Lord's servants. The thing that is going forth from us, the thing that is the effect of our lives, according to these words, is the knowledge of Christ. Everywhere, not just as by us, but because of us, people are coming to a knowledge of Christ. The very object of our being is that Christ should be known because of us. The Divinely appointed way of people coming to know Christ is by our being here, moving among people.

The extra point that has to be noticed is this, that it is something more than our giving out knowledge concerning Christ; it is that we are to people the knowledge of Christ. There is a very big difference between giving out the truth concerning the Lord Jesus and that strange, deep, indispensable element that we are that truth, that that truth itself takes its power, its strength from the fact that here are those who are the living expression of it. Here are those who have gone through the depths, been tested, been tried, been taken from place to place, been subjected to experiences of intense severity, and in the fires have learned Christ and are, therefore, themselves the embodiment of that knowledge of Christ.

Wherever they go, it is not that they have truth to give, but it is that men and women learn Christ because of them. Of them it can be said: It is not what they say only. There is something coming from them. There is an indescribable "something" that is an extra element to what they say. That thing has its reality in their being. You feel that it is not only the words but the very virtue that comes out when they speak or by reason of their presence. It is that of which the Apostle is speaking.

That is the real value of any knowledge of Christ that we can give, which others may come to possess by us. It is not that they come through us to know more about Christ, but that there is a ministration of Christ. That is the thing for which we should seek the Lord very earnestly.

This represents the cost of ministry. Ministry of this kind is an intensely costly thing. It is so different from being a preacher as a preacher. To be a Paul is a desperately costly thing. And to minister Christ is a thing into which our very blood will be poured.

This kind of ministry can bring no satisfaction to the flesh. This kind of ministry is not something for which to grasp for ourselves. This kind of ministry is something that we should plead to be delivered from unless our life and heart passion is that Christ Himself—not ourselves, but Christ Himself should be known.

This is the true value of ministry. It is a thing of suffering, but it is the thing that goes beyond words, far beyond clever thinking and clever expressing, far beyond that acute needle-like brain that grasps truth and then begins to give it out. It is, in a word, Christ ministered, not Christ ministered about. Paul saw that there was no doubt about it, that this ministry was effective, although effective in two directions. Not always did it result in people leaping into life, but it always resulted in something. If it plunged some people more deeply into death, it was a proof that it was effective. If it brought death home to some consciences, that proved its power. To have real spiritual effect demands that this shall be the kind of ministers that we are.

The Lord is moving in a wonderfully blessed way among people whose hearts are open, whose spirits are simple, and who have little to throw off in order to go after Him. Are we active in the Lord in heart? Are we really going on, or have we come to a standstill? Have we never started?

Here is Christ brought near, and there can be an increase of Christ, an increase of divine life. It will depend on whether you are open—not that you have a great deal of ability or knowledge or understanding of the meaning of it all—but whether your heart is open and reaching out to the Lord. Marvelous things can happen if you are in that state.

It is not that you should have a perfect understanding of yourself, but it is that your heart is actively toward the Lord. Then everything is possible. That is the way of life, the direction of life: that you are obeying whatever light the Lord has given you. That you are obedient to everything that He has made known to you as His will, that is the way of life and the way of an increase of life.

The way of death may be, at its beginning, no intention whatever of being the Lord's. Or, it may be at some point further on, where the Lord has said in your heart, "This is My way for you, that is My will for you!". You have perhaps not said, "No, Lord" in as many words, but that is what your life is saying. That "No" has now been hanging over your life for perhaps five, ten years, perhaps longer. It is not that you have never said positively, "I will never be obedient. I am not going that way!" That is a negative. That is "No!" It is not "Yes!" to the Lord.

We may either increase or decrease. We may be more positive or less so. We are either in a fuller way of death or a fuller way of life. It is a tremendous thing. It is impossible to get away from the alternatives. Open the heart! Reach out to the Lord! Move in obedience to every bit of light that He has given, and it shall be a savor of life unto life.

Excerpted and edited by Patrick J. Hession from a message by T. Austin-Sparks