

2 Corinthians - Commentaries by Hamilton Smith

The Lord Is My Shepherd and Other Papers, Christ the Object in Glory (3:1-18)

How then, we may ask, is the writing of Christ on the hearts of God's people to be kept clear and legible, so that, in the gathering of God's people the character of Christ can be manifest to all men?

The answer to this question brings us to the third great truth of the chapter. Christ will be manifested to all men only as we have before us the living Christ in the glory as our Object. So the Apostle writes, "We all, looking on the glory of the Lord, with unveiled face, are transformed according to the same image from glory to glory" (vs. 18 JND). There is a transforming power in beholding the Lord in glory. This transforming power is available for all believers – the youngest as well as the oldest; "we all," not simply "we Apostles," beholding the glory of the Lord "are changed into the same image." This change is not affected by our own efforts, nor by wearying ourselves in the endeavor to be like the Lord. Nor is it by seeking to imitate some devoted saint. It is by beholding the glory of the Lord. There is no veil on His face, and as we behold Him, not only every veil of darkness will pass from our hearts, but morally we shall become increasingly like Him, changing from glory to glory. Gazing upon the Lord in glory we are lifted above all the weakness and failure that we find in ourselves, and all the evil around, to discover and delight in His perfection. As the bride in the Song of Songs can say, "I sat down under His shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste."

In the course of the Epistle the Apostle gives us a taste of some of this precious fruit. Turning to chapter 5, we read in verse 14, that "the love of Christ constraineth us." Here the love of Christ is presented as the true motive for all ministry, whether to saints or sinners. The greatest expression of that love was His death. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Again we read, "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it." With such love before his soul the Apostle can well say, "that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again." In the light of this Scripture we may well challenge our hearts as to the motive that actuates us in all our service. Is it the love of Christ that constrains us, or is it the love of self? Are we living unto ourselves, or are we living "unto Him," and thus, like Him, willing to forget self in order to serve others in love. One has said, "Alas! how often have we to reproach ourselves with going on in a round of Christian duty, faithful in general intention, but not flowing from the fresh realization of the love of Christ to our soul" (J. N. Darby).

Passing to chapter 8, and verse 9, we come to another lovely characteristic of Christ. There we read of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." The Apostle is pleading on behalf of the poor Jewish believers, urging the richer Corinthian saints to help in meeting their necessities. In both verses 6 and 7, he speaks of giving as a "grace." Then he sets before us Christ as the One in whom we have a transcendent example of the grace of giving. He was rich, surpassingly rich, and yet to meet our deep needs He not only gives, but, such is His grace that, He becomes poor to give. "For your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." By the incarnation He became poor, and His poverty is witnessed by the manger at Bethlehem and the humble home at Nazareth, and that, in the days of His ministry He Himself said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head" (Luke 9:58). To reach a poor fallen woman and bring heaven's best gifts to earth's worst sinners, He became a poor, needy, and lonely man by a well side. The very moment when He is enriching us with a fountain of water springing up unto eternal life, He Himself has become so poor that he has to ask for a drink of water (John 4:7,14).

Turning to chapter 10, and verse 1, we find some more refreshing fruit that marked the life of Christ. First we read of "the meekness of Christ." The Apostle is correcting the spirit of rivalry that had been working amongst the Corinthian saints, whereby some of the gifted servants were measuring themselves with one another, and seeking to commend themselves. So doing, they were walking in the flesh and warring after the flesh, glorying in their gifts, talking about themselves, boasting in their work, and belittling the Apostle. To correct their vanity and self-assertiveness, he brings before them the meekness of Christ who never asserted His rights, or defended Himself; who, when He was reviled, reviled not again. The chief priests may defame Him, but "Jesus held His peace." He is falsely accused before Pilate, but "He answered him to never a word." He is mocked by Herod, but "He answered him nothing." Good for us, if in the presence of defamation and insults, we could catch something of the spirit of the Lord and show the meekness that refuses to assert our rights, stand upon our dignity, or defend ourselves.

Then the Apostle speaks of "the gentleness of Christ," another lovely quality that He ever exhibited in the presence of opposition. Seeking to obey the word of the Lord and maintain the truth, we shall soon find that there are those who will oppose and raise questions that lead to strife. "The servant of the Lord must not strive" but seek to act in the spirit of the Lord and be "gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient." The gentleness of Christ speaks of the manner in which He acted and spoke. How often, with ourselves, even if our motive is right, and the principles we stand for are true, all is spoiled because our manner is lacking in graciousness and gentleness. Let us remember the striking words of the Psalmist, "Thy gentleness hath made me great" (Psalm 18:35). Our vehemence may easily degenerate into violence by which we belittle ourselves in the eyes of others; but gentleness will make us great. Violence draws out violence; but gentleness is irresistible. "The fruit of the Spirit ... is gentleness."

Finally, in chapter 12, and verse 9, we read of "the power of Christ." The Apostle is speaking of bodily infirmities, insults, necessities, persecutions and distresses. He learned by experience that all these things only become an occasion for the manifestation of "the power of Christ" to preserve the believer through the trials and lift him above them. Thus we learn that whatever the trial, His "grace is sufficient," and His "strength is made perfect in weakness."

Thus, with our eyes upon Christ in the glory, we are reminded by the Apostle of the perfections of Christ as He passes before us.

"The love of Christ",

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ",

"The meekness of Christ",

"The gentleness of Christ", and

"The power of Christ."

As we look at Christ in the glory and admire these lovely moral traits, set forth in all their perfection in Christ, we find His fruit sweet to our taste, and, almost unconsciously to ourselves, shall begin to exhibit something of His gracious character, and thus become changed into His image.

Thus the Holy Spirit not only writes Christ on the heart so that we become epistles of Christ, but, by engaging our hearts with Christ in glory, He transforms us into His image and so keeps the writing clear that it may be read of all men.

What a wonderful testimony it would be if the world could look upon any little company of the Lord's people and see in them "love," "grace," "meekness," "gentleness," and "power" that enable them to rise above all circumstances.

May we realize, in deeper measure, that it is the mind of God that His people should be the epistle of Christ to manifest Christ to all men, by having Christ in the glory before us as our one Object.

It is God's intention that in the lives of His people there should be a presentation of Christ "known and read of all men."

The Lord Is My Shepherd and Other Papers, Christ Manifested to All Men (3:1-18)

Having set forth the true Christian company as composed of believers upon whose hearts Christ has been written, the Apostle presents the second great truth when he says, not only, "Ye are the epistle of Christ," but also, "Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ," "known and read of all men."

It is one thing for a gathering of believers to be an epistle of Christ, and quite another for the gathering to be in such a right condition that they manifest to all men something of the character of Christ. The responsibility of any gathering of saints is, not to walk well in order to become an epistle, but, seeing they are an epistle of Christ, to walk well in order that the epistle may be read of all men. If anyone writes a letter of commendation it is to commend the person named in the letter. So when the Spirit of God writes Christ on the hearts of believers, it is in order that they together may become an epistle of commendation to commend Christ to the world around. That by their holy and separate walk, their mutual love to one another, their lowliness and meekness, their gentleness and grace, they may set forth the lovely character of Christ.

Thus it was with the Corinthian saints. They had, indeed, been walking in a disorderly way: but, as the result of the Apostle's first letter, they had cleared themselves from evil so that the Apostle can now say, not only that as an assembly they were an epistle of Christ, but, that they were an epistle "known and read of all men."

Alas! the writing may become indistinct, but it does not cease to be a letter because it is blotted and blurred. Christians are often like the writing on some ancient tomb stone. There are faint indications of an inscription. A capital letter here and there would indicate some name was once written on the stone. But it is so weather-worn and dirt-begrimed that it is hardly possible to decipher the writing. So, alas, may it be with ourselves. When first the Spirit writes Christ upon the hearts of a company of saints, their affections are warm and their collective life speaks plainly of Christ. The writing, being fresh and clear, is known and read of all men. But, as time passes, unless there is watchfulness and self-judgment, envying, strife and bitterness may creep in, and the gathering cease to give any true impression of Christ.

Nevertheless, in spite of all our failure, Christians are the epistle of Christ and it ever remains true that it is God's great intention that all men should see the character of Christ set forth in His people. Here, then, we have a beautiful description of the true Christian company. It is a company of individual believers, gathered to Christ, upon whose hearts Christ has been written, not with ink, but "with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." As in the tables of stone of old, men could read what the righteousness of God demanded from man under law, so, now, in the lives of God's people, the world should read what the love of God brings to man under grace.

The Lord Is My Shepherd and Other Papers, Christ Written on the Heart (3:1-18)

First, then, let us notice that the Apostle speaks of these believers as "the epistle of Christ." He does not say the "epistles" but the "epistle," for he is not thinking simply of what is true of individuals, but of the whole company, though obviously, the company is composed of individuals.

Then let us remark, that the Apostle does not say, "Ye should be the epistle of Christ," but, "Ye are the epistle of Christ." Entertaining the wrong thought that we ought to be epistles of Christ, we shall set to work to become such by our own efforts. This would not only lead us into legal occupation with ourselves, but would also shut out the work of "the Spirit of the living God." The fact is that we become epistles of Christ, not by our own efforts, but by the Spirit of God writing Christ upon our hearts.

A Christian is one to whom Christ has become precious by a work of the Spirit in the heart. It is not simply a knowledge of Christ in the head, which an unconverted man may have, that constitutes a man a Christian, but Christ written in the heart. As sinners we discover our need of Christ, and are burdened with our sins. We find relief by discovering that Christ by His propitiatory work has died for our sins, and that God has set forth His acceptance of that work by seating Christ in the glory. We rest in God's satisfaction with Christ and His work, and our affections are drawn out to the One through whom we have been blessed. "Unto you therefore which believe He is precious." Thus Christ is written on our hearts and we become the epistle of Christ. If we are not the epistle of Christ we are not Christians at all.

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