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Lee Magness
jlmagness@milligan.edu

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Our Ministers, Our Ministries

2 Corinthians 2–4

Lee Magness

In this reading, based on selections from 2 Corinthians, chapters 2–4, Paul reflects on the nature of Christian ministry and thus on the nature of the church. These metaphors of ministry become powerful images in which we recognize various aspects of our relationship with God, our relationship with fellow ministers, and our awareness of ourselves. The reading is configured here for three voices. Readers 1 and 2 reflect on and apply the passages from 2 Corinthians read by Reader 3.

- 1 What are the marks of ministry for the Messiah?
What are the signs of service to our Sovereign?
- 2 What tools must we take up,
what skills should we hone?
- 1, 2 What are the marks of ministry?

Stanza 1 ~ Ministers are gardeners, farmers in God's field.

- 3 *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul?
Only servants, through whom you came to believe—
as the Lord has assigned to each their task.
I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.
So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,
but only God, who makes things grow.
The person who plants and the person who waters have one purpose,
and each will be rewarded according to their own labor.
For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field. (1 Corinthians 3.5–9)*

- 1 Ministers are gardeners, farmers in God's field,
- 2 sowers, waterers, at work in God's garden,
gifted for God-given tasks,
- 1 fellow farmers in the same field,
carrying out complementary assignments,
- 2 lauded, each one, according to our labors,
co-workers—co-workers!—of God.
- 1 So we sow,
- 2 and so we water,
- 1,2 but God gives the growth.

- 1 Give us, O God, the desire to dig, the passion to plow,
the resolve to rake and reap, the hope to hoe and harvest.
2 Make us fit to farm, even as you have graced us to garden.

Stanza 2 ~ Ministers are also builders.

- 3 *You are God's building.*
By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a skilled builder,
and someone else is building on it.
But each one should be careful how they build.
For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid,
which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3.9–11)

- 1 Ministers are also builders,
2 focusing on the foundation, not tempted toward the tangential,
wise builders, experienced builders, skillful builders,
1 living stones supported by the Living Stone,
constantly shaped, continually shaping,
2 cradling the chisel ourselves as a grace-gift from God
and sharing it unselfishly with others.

- 1 So we are God's building,
2 and we are God's builders,
1,2 but the building belongs to God.

- 1 Help us stand firm on the foundation that is Jesus Christ,
not only building the temple of God, but being the temple of God.
2 Challenge us, O God, to build wisely and well.

Stanza 3 ~ Ministers must be soldiers.

- 3 *But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. (2 Corinthians 2.14)*

- 1 Ministers must be soldiers, who fight the good fight,
marching in step, fresh from the field,
2 not long for the barracks, for basking in the glow of the general's glory,
focused forward, armed with the very armor of God.

- 1 So we are the Lord's soldiers,
2 we share in his victory,
1,2 but the victory belongs to the Lord.

- 1 Make us warriors, O God, wearing your armor not ours,
your truth, your justice, your peace,
2 standing firm in your faithfulness, celebrating your salvation, wielding your word.

Stanza 4 ~ Ministers are an aroma.

3 *For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved. (2 Corinthians 2.15)*

1 Ministers are an aroma, the fragrance of Christ,
spreading the sweet smell of the mercy of Christ,
2 the aroma of a meaningful life,
a sacrifice pleasing to God.

1 So we are the fragrance of Christ,
2 a pleasing aroma, not only to us or others,
1,2 but a sacrifice pleasing to God.

1 Make us your perfume, O God,
permeating the room around us,
2 the aroma of Christ in this and every place you have called us to serve.

Stanza 5 ~ Ministers must be slaves, heralding the coming king.

3 *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord,
and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake. (2 Corinthians 4.5)*

1 Ministers must be slaves, heralding the coming king,
first slaves, subject to our Sovereign,
2 then heralds, whose privilege it is to proclaim Christ,
to proclaim his Lordship over our lives and others'.

1 So we are slaves for Christ's sake,
2 proclaiming not ourselves,
1,2 but Jesus Christ as Lord.

1 Help us proclaim the coming king, O God,
as slaves who serve and share,
2 as heralds who hear and herald what we have heard.

Stanza 6 ~ Ministers are earthen vessels.

3 *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"
made his light shine in our hearts
to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.
But we have this treasure in clay containers
to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4.6-7)*

1 Ministers are earthen vessels, clay containers,
2 fragile—crushable by cruelty, crackable by care-less-ness—
so fragile but so useful,
1 full, not of gold or gems or even water, but oil,
lamps, little lamps, fashioned from any leftover lump of clay,
2 but dispelling the darkness, shedding light on the shadowlands,
illuminating a dark night, a dark room, a dark path, a dark soul.

1 So we are lamps, simple lumps of clay,
2 saved to shine, graced to glow,
1,2 but bearing the light of the Lord.

1 Make us, take us, O God, frail and fragile,
and fill us, reflecting, glowing with your glory.
2 Let us illumine lives.

1 These are the marks of ministry for the Messiah.
These are the signs of service to our Sovereign.
2 These are the tools we must take up,
these are the skills we should hone.
1,2 These are the marks of ministry.

LEE MAGNESS IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF NEW TESTAMENT AT MILLIGAN COLLEGE IN TENNESSEE AND CONTINUES
ADJUNCT TEACHING AT MILLIGAN COLLEGE AND EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY (JLMAGNESS@MILLIGAN.EDU).

