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Utterness for the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Kings 19:16,19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-6,9-15.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto the Father." John 14:12.

"And He said unto them, It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within His own authority. But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when He had said these things, as they were looking, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight." Acts 1:7-9.

Let us first of all see what is in view in these passages, and it is quite clear that the matter in view is that of succession and the carrying on of the Lord's testimony in fulness. That is quite clear in the case of Elisha succeeding Elijah under the anointing, and proved to be a very real and clear type and foreshadowing of John 14:12: "...the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto the Father".

The works of Elisha of the same kind and order were even greater than those of Elijah his predecessor, after Elijah had gone to heaven, and it therefore was, in that case, a carrying on of the testimony in fulness by reason of the anointing, and the principle of succession is that of anointing.

The Lord is followed by reason of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The Lord's own work is carried on through that anointing. The testimony of Jesus is a matter of the anointing.

Well, that is where we start, by taking note of the simple fact that the object in view is that of the carrying on of the Lord's testimony in fulness.

Then we have to see, after that, some of the features which are basic to that carrying on, and the first one, the one that I feel constrained to emphasize most now, if not only, is the feature of utterness for the Lord.

Just look again at this Old Testament foreshadowing of what we have in the New Testament, and what operates in principle in the case of all those who are in this Divine succession. With Elisha, the first step was a kind of hint or gesture. All that Elisha knew about this matter was that, while he was one day occupied in a very thoroughgoing way with his daily employment, with his business, in his ordinary vocation, the prophet (doubtless known to him), crossed his path and as he passed him, threw over him his mantle, and went hurrying on. It was a kind of hint, perhaps a pointed hint, a gesture. Nothing was said, although the Lord had said to Elijah, "Anoint Elisha to be prophet in thy room", he did not there and then anoint him. Indeed, we have no record at all of Elijah ever anointing Elisha. He did not make a ceremony of it. He did not go among the number of men who must have been ploughing - there were twelve yoke of oxen being employed, which means no doubt at least twelve ploughs were at work and he with the last. It says that he slew a yoke of oxen and gave to the people and they did eat; it was evidently quite a feast. But the prophet did not go into the midst of the crowd and take hold of Elisha and say, "Look here, you are the man of the day! You have got to be ordained to be prophet in my place! You are my successor!"

He did not single him out and make a fuss of him and call him from that day a prophet, a minister, "You are an important person, the successor of the great man so-and-so!" He simply hurried passed him and Elisha had to run after him. He hurried by and just threw on him his mantle. It may not have been that he left the mantle with him. It was enough, and only enough to let Elisha know that something had happened, that he had come under the Divine eye; there were Divine designs in his life. There was a hint, an intimation, a gesture, which suggested to him a crisis, a change: "Today is a vital day, a very significant day! Things are going to change from now!" It was just that Elisha was made aware that God had some thought about him, some purpose in his life, and he was left with that. That is the first stage - just a hint, just a gesture. There was an immense thing in view, but just that.

You know, the Lord usually deals with people like that. Men do not deal with us like that. Men seek to get hold of us, detach us from all the rest of men, make something of us, inflate us, ordain us, stick labels on us - The Reverend So-and-So! - and call us by a special name, single us out in that way and distinguish us. That is not the way of the Divine work at all. That may be very misleading; it may get a lot of men into a false position. The point is this. God may have the greatest of intentions where we are concerned. He will never come and tell us all about it in one go. He will never make us feel how tremendously important we are right at the outset. The Lord will give us a hint, make a gesture, give us just so much to know that He has got a thought for us and for the rest it is with us. The Lord gives us enough and just enough, to find out where we are, whether we mean business.

Elisha was a man who meant business so far as this world is concerned. He had got all his resources in operation, on full stretch in his natural business. Will he be as thoroughgoing with only a hint

from God that there is Divine business in view, will he be as thoroughgoing as he is in other matters? It is just enough, but quite enough to see where our hearts are, to find out whether we mean business.

I like the next step very much. "And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again; for what have I done to thee?"

Now, what I like about it is this, that Elisha, while he went back, went back just to clear things up and to free himself to respond to the Divine call. I mean this, that although it would look as though he had been given his discharge, his release, although what Elijah said to him might have been taken on as - "Oh well, this is not so serious, after all! This is not so imperative and not so immediate!" The account would lead us to think that Elisha, though he went back, was of this mind - "Yes, now something has happened, I have just got to get things cleared up as quickly as I can!" and he did thoroughly. He was conscious that this thing was something that he could not play with. It was only a hint, only a gesture, but he could not play with it. But "Go back, what have I done to you?", sounds almost like a rebuff, doesn't it? Almost a set-back. Elisha might have said, "Oh well, if you don't want me, all right, I will go back!" No, the Lord knows exactly what He is doing. Just hold to that.

Now the next thing. You notice that after that had happened, Elisha slew his oxen and made his feast and went and ministered to Elijah. There are quite a few things recorded about what Elijah is still doing here and there, indicating that quite a time elapsed before you come to 2 Kings 2 and that is the next reference to Elisha; Elijah is taken up. That is a period of probation, a period of being a disciple. In another place it says that he poured water on the hands of Elijah - just a servant. Here is a man who had had considerable resources in this world; he had means, property, an estate, things on a fairly large scale, and now he is wandering about the earth on the heels of a prophet, pouring water on his hands, doing manual jobs, just being a servant of a prophet for an extended period, not coming into very much himself, not mentioned himself at all; his name does not occur. An important point to remember.

Then come to 2 Kings 2. The time has come that Elijah would be taken away. Elijah said to Elisha, "Tarry here, the Lord has called me to Bethel." "As the Lord lives, and as thy soul lives, I will not leave thee", and they went to Bethel. Again - "Elisha, you stay here. The Lord has sent me to Jericho." "As the Lord lives, and as thy soul lives, I will not leave thee." And they went to Jericho. Again - "Elisha, you stay here. The Lord has sent me to Jordan." "As the Lord lives, and as thy soul lives, I will not leave thee." Now, those three - and then added in that in every place the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, "Do you know that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today?" "I know all about it - you keep quiet!"

Can you read between the lines of this story? On the one hand it looks as though Elijah is persistently and repeatedly trying to shake the man off, but the man whom he is trying to shake off will not be shaken off, and with all that is being said, he knows what is in view, he knows what is going to happen, and he says in effect, "I am not being shaken off!"

Now, all those things from the beginning. First only a gesture; the Lord did not come out in the first place and tell him that he was a great man destined to a great work, to be successor to the great prophet, Elijah. No, simply a gesture. Then a rebuff, a set-back, "Go back, what have I done to you!" Then a period of being a nobody; he had been the first man up to that time. He was the man in his

former sphere of life, and now he was just the servant of a prophet, a nobody whose name is not mentioned for a period. Then the man for whom he had given up everything, let all that this world held for him go, this man persistently tries to shake him off. That is the story. It was through that kind of history that Elisha came to the double portion of the Spirit, to the anointing, and to the greater works.

The point that the Lord is wanting to make is this point of utterness for the Lord. In the carrying forward of His testimony in fulness, it will require an Elisha attitude of heart, and God will test us along various lines to see if that is our attitude of heart. He will test us. He will test us by not telling us that we are a great people with a great destiny, but just an intimation that He has got some interest bound up with our lives. That is all, to see how we react to that. Then something that we could, if we were minded to do so, take as our way out, our release, as being an intimation that, after all, it does not matter. And then a time in which nothing seems to be happening very much. We do not seem to be coming into very much ministry - nothing very much bound up with us, we are second fiddles, and then it would seem as though the Lord is Himself, by the way He takes with us, trying to shake us off, and the whole of this amounts to one question - can you be shaken off? That is, have you a predisposition to take a second best or not to go on with the Lord in His full thought, or is it in you that this thing, God's first best, God's full thought, the carrying on of His testimony in fulness, is such a thing that no rebuff can turn you aside, no set-back can upset you, no seeming effort of the Lord to put you off will work. Rather, through every test, you say, "No, I am going on!" That is what I think comes up here.

You notice that you have a parallel to this in the New Testament with the disciples. They were sovereignly tested on a probation. Then they were left alone. During those ten days of waiting after the Lord had gone up - they could have said, "Oh well, it was all a fancy, an illusion, nothing is happening!" But they continued fervently in prayer. I think that is the challenge of the Lord to us. Do we really mean business with God or can we be put off? The Lord deals with us before ever we come into the meaning of the anointing, the working of the anointing, the power of the anointing, the purpose of the anointing. The Lord deals with us in such a way as to find out whether we want to get out, have a second way which is easier, or whether we will not be shaken off. It seems a terrible thing to say that God would seem to be trying to shake us off, but I think that is the only conclusion we can come to. I do not believe, of course, that Elijah was trying to shake off Elisha, to get rid of Elisha. He was seeing if he could be shaken off, and there was a big thing lying ahead for the man who would not be put back, who, in fact, said, "I am going right on!" There was a big thing lying ahead for that man - the power of the anointing.

Now you see you have this: the Divine thought never disclosed to Elisha, but disclosed to Elijah. "Anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place", that was said to Elijah. That was the Divine thought, that he was in view for the anointing unto the succession, the carrying on of the Lord's testimony. It was not disclosed to Elisha himself, but what came to Elisha was a suggestion that the Lord had got him in mind, and then, with the intimation, a challenge, a time of testing, which could have put him off and would have put off anyone who really did not mean utterness for the Lord. And then (and this is what struck me) the Lord had said to Elijah, "Anoint Elisha", and we have no record here of Elijah anointing Elisha. All that we do know is this, that after the probation and the testing, they came to the Jordan and passed over together, and when Elijah went up, his mantle fell and Elisha took it, and the spirit of Elijah did come to rest upon Elisha. The anointing took effect when? Not by a service of ordination, but after a time of proving himself that he really did mean business with God. I believe that that is a factor with God always; whether we really mean business. Can we be deterred? Can we

be put back? Oh, there are those who are all the time seeming to be looking for an excuse to get out or keep out of what the Lord would have. They are looking round for something to take hold of against that very way, if peradventure it might be an excuse for not taking that way.

What is the weight, what is the nature, of anything that might hold us back from utterness? What is the value of it, after all? We may raise arguments and have merely mental difficulties which are ours, produced by the work of our own minds, or we might be criticizing, finding the flaws, seeing things. Why are we doing it? You see, it is all of a piece with that sort of thing which comes up with certain questions. So often old stock questions come up: "Well now, if you are once saved, can you be lost? So often that question has been put to me with the idea of drawing out into an argument. I have to take the attitude toward those people, "What is your interest in that? Why are you interested in a thing like that?"

You remember the story, don't you, of a man who wanted a driver for his vehicle which had to take him round a very narrow path on a mountain side which overlooked a terrible precipice. He advertised for a driver and got quite a number of replies. The men came to see him. He said to the first man, "How near can you drive to the edge without going over?" The man thought he was very clever and bound to get the job and he said, "I could go within a few inches without going over!" "All right, wait in the next room!" Then the next man came and the question was repeated. "Oh, I could probably go about a foot away from the edge!" He was sent into the other room. Another man came in and the question was repeated. "Well, I do not know, I have not tried, but I think I could get pretty near and still be on the safe side!" The last man was called in and the question was repeated. He replied, "I always make it my business to keep as far away from the edge as I can!" "You are the man I want!" And he got the job.

You see, well, what is your interest in questions like that? Do you want to know how near the edge you can go without toppling over? I don't think the Bible answers those questions. It gives us a precipice, that is all. There is a precipice there, but do not take any risks. Keep as far away from that point as possible. That is the Bible's way. You see, the Lord wants utterness! Not, "Need I, must I? How far can I go?" Oh no, nothing of that. The Lord does not make any provision for that. Now here the question is not, "Must I?" not, "How far can I go?" The anointing does not come there at all. The carrying on of the testimony in fulness as vessels is not with those who would argue, reason, find some ground for keeping out, but those who, like Elisha, say, "As the Lord lives, I am not being put off this! I am not staying behind a third of the way, two-thirds of the way. No, I am going all the way!" That is Elisha.

Well now, when we come to the Lord, we receive the Spirit, but remember we are dealing now with the matter of spiritual life. We received the Spirit, we received the anointing, but Elisha in token received the anointing when the Lord said to Elijah, "Anoint Elisha!" It was secured to him, but he never came into the real meaning and power of the anointing until he passed through that probation and that testing, and had let the Lord see that he meant business; that, as with his natural work, so in the Lord's interests it was nothing short of twelve yoke of oxen - all out.

I do not think that we ever get out of this school here in this life, but for every fresh measure of Divine fulness the Lord works on this principle. When the Lord has something more in view than ever has been, He will put us through a fresh phase of testing to see whether we are going on, and then, as this whole life is on this basis, He is preparing us for the great ministry of the ages to come, the great ministry to which the church, His Body, is called and destined. As you know, the

overcomers are the ones who come to that, but who are the overcomers? Those who could not, who would not, be put off, who would not take the second best, the easier way, but who would go right on with the last ounce. May the Lord have us like that! Not, "Must I?" not, "How much must I?" Not, "Can I?" But: "It does not matter what You say or do, I am going on without any reservations!"