

Galatians 5:22

Mar 9, 2008

Rom. 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

“In Gentleness and Power”

In his wonderful little book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis describes a scene at a bus stop, just about sunset. People are pushing and shoving, and arguing, unmindful of the needs of others. Angry words are spoken all around and people seem selfish and miserable. The bus takes people from this place to another where they are welcomed with loving concern and offered help on a path to the distant mountains, where the sun is rising. As we continue to read, we discover that there is a great distance between the scene at the bus stop, where it is always sunset, and the foothills of the shining mountains. We discover that the great divorce is between heaven and hell.

Our world is full of pushing and shoving, and people afraid that giving will mean losing. Afraid that if they don't fight for their rights at every turn, they will become the hole in the donut: a nothing, powerless to protect themselves from the powerful. Most of us here probably have incomes that place us above the poverty line. Yet, given the politics and economy, many of us feel we are below the power line. We may not be poor, but we don't have a finger on the strings of power in this society.

The Bible often speaks of power and how to use it. The starting point is this: God has the power to bring forth life. [Look at creation, then look at Jesus.] The Gospel lesson this morning tells of the power of God in Jesus. But the lesson read is really only one half the story. The second half stands in stark contrast to the first; violently at odds with it. The first half deals with the power of God and the second half deals with the power of humans. It is the great power struggle of our times (of all times); the great power struggle within each of us: human power vs. God's power.

The first half of the story is about a miracle, and this, of course, is the power of God. One of Jesus' close friends, Lazarus, falls ill and dies. [Jesus and his disciples are away, maybe hiding from the authorities. When he receives word that his friend has died Jesus faces a tough decision: whether to go to mourn, bring comfort to Lazarus' family and risk arrest or to stay in hiding. He finally decides to go, despite warnings from his disciples.] Arriving in Bethany Jesus is struck to the heart by the grief of Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, and he himself is in anguish when faced with the reality of the death of his friend. The Bible says, "Jesus wept."

Then it happened, even as he himself said it would happen and as it would later happen to him. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" and the dead man rose and came out of the tomb, trailing the bandages which

bound him. This is power of God. It is summed up in Jesus' own words, "I am the resurrection and the life." That is his pledge and that is the power of God.

The second half of this story is about human power and it is nicely summed up in one simple sentence, in verse 53: "So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death." I know that verse is outside our reading for today, but it really belongs here as part of the whole story. How ironic, that Jesus' gift of life to Lazarus prompts faith in some, but violent opposition in others. It led some men to want to kill him.

Look at them: the power of God in Jesus Christ - to give life, and not to the body only, but to give life to whatever is dead or dying. And the power of humans in the men who killed Jesus Christ [All it took was a few plotters, and a handful of soldiers, even fewer nails, and reasonably strong stomachs on the part of the one or two men who actually did the job.] Crowd them together and you will notice that the two powers jostle within ourselves. And the power of God seems powerless against those who choose to oppose it.

Take a closer look at the power of humans. This does not take long - not because humans have so little power that it is not worth mentioning, but because we have so much, that it really does not *need* mentioning. Humanity's most absolute power, the one we can be surest of because it involves nothing except power, is the power to destroy. One does not need talent or brains to destroy. Anybody can do it. We see this kind of power daily in our news reports – terrorism, gang violence, domestic abuse. [But in Iraq, Lebanon, China and other places it is slowly losing its power in the face of a unified cry for freedom.]

But humans also have the power to create. We can make things: paintings, furniture, aircraft, political systems, theological systems, schools and educational systems. In other words, humans have the power to create *and* to destroy, for good or for evil. But the fundamental characteristic of human power is that it tends to be external and coercive. Humans have the power to push, pull, prod and mold others to their liking, but only from the outside. This is the world we know.

Into this world steps the 8th characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness. It represents a life surrendered to the power of God and lived in the power of the Holy Spirit, not fettered by legalism, but freed as God's agent. Beginning with the apostles, countless believers through the ages model this power of God in their lives. They have put themselves in our Father's hands and freely given themselves to God's great purposes. We can too.

Gentleness does not mean powerlessness. The Greek for gentleness is *πραΰτης*, which means a surrender to God's will and way in your life. "As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right"(Jer. 26:14). It means to stop fighting against God, although it does not mean

weakness. Gentleness, like kindness, shows forth in someone who has power, is strong, and uses that power and strength to lift up those who are weak and powerless. There is power and strength found in submitting to God's will. Πραΰτης is responsibility with that power. Πραΰτης consists of submission, humility, a teachable spirit, and teaching ability.¹

1. Submission

The foundation of godly gentleness is in submission – the word we love to hate. Do you resist God's directions, and will in your living? Do you argue with God about your calling, His purpose in your living? Πραΰτης describes a rest from this kind of resistance. When the wind of God's will blows, πραΰτης will let go of all things holding one back from going with God. It is riding the wind of God's will and setting off toward a place of closeness with God.

2. Humility

“Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord.” Humility in relation to God requires a correct estimation of our selves, which results from a correct estimation of our God. John the Baptist exemplifies humility: “I am not the Christ. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23). He had reason to be proud: chosen by God to be the announcer of the Messiah. Yet he said, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

During his 14 years in prison, Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand was terribly tortured, yet Communist Colonel Franco was stunned when interrogating his victim. Wurmbrand had once been an atheist like him. Leaving the prison, Colonel Franco returned home to his wife and declared, “Something is wrong with me! I am sick. I have never met anyone like this man in my whole life.”

The colonel was surprised by two forces unknown to him – agape love and godly humility – against which the world has no defense. In trying to catch the wind, the wind caught him and brought him eternal life. Colonel Franco became a Christian and also went to prison.²

[Titus 3:1-2 “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.”]

3. Teachable Spirit

Proverbs 4:13 “Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.” In other words, receive instruction – be teachable. Are you willing to learn in your Christian walk? After his conversion Paul spent time with the

¹Beth Moore, *Living Beyond Yourself, Exploring the Fruit of the Spirit* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 1998), 168-187.

²Tom White, “They Can Never Catch the Wind,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*, March 2008 (Bartlesville, OK), 2.

disciples to learn more of Jesus and the gospel (Acts 9:17-19). James 1:21 “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

4. Ability to teach

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) contains two commands. 1) Make disciples; 2) Teach them to obey. We are called to be teachers of God’s word – that’s essential to making disciples. The N.T. mentions teacher 58 times; 41 refer to Jesus. He is the example to follow.

[Teach as Jesus taught. John 8:28-29 tells us that we cannot teach simply that which pleases us. Even Christ taught only what was given him by the Father. We are to be teacher-servants, obedient to the will of God. Our podium or platform is not for spouting our personal opinions and crusades. Like Christ, we must teach what God gives to teach. John 17:17 teaches us that God’s word is the truth and has the power to sanctify believers. The teacher’s words must always measure up to God’s word. Our teaching should come from an inward grace of the soul, in gentleness and humility, in an attitude of submission and awareness of our own sins, leaving condemnation to God and conviction to the H.S. John 13:1-17 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. The teacher models servant hood in order to teach them an important lesson. He taught from his knees as a gentle giant.]

Many of you do not consider yourselves teachers, but if you look at the responsibilities God has given you at home, at work, at church you’ll discover that you do teach in some manner or position. We have all been called by God to be living witnesses – someone is learning from us each day. Remember that *πραυτες* means strength of character revealed in meekness of manner and responsibility with power.

[The ultimate teacher is one who has been filled with the power of the H.S. and knows how to use it. The Sword of the Spirit is to injure Satan, not the Body of Christ. Exhortation of believers does not mean their injury. 2 Timothy 2:24-26 “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”]

We cannot teach what we do not know and we cannot teach them to obey what we do not obey. A good teacher of God will continually study God’s word in the Bible *and* live out what is learned. [If Jesus had died peacefully in his sleep or had collapsed of a heart attack while walking along the seashore with his disciples, we would have a very different message for the world.] Without the cross we would still have Jesus’ teachings. But we wouldn’t have

the gospel. He walked in gentleness and power. His life was submitted to God's purposes, even to death on a cross.

The cross shows that the only way to know life is to know death. Any religion that has nothing to say about this matter of dying, has nothing to say. But we do have something to say to the world. Can we be bold enough to say it? Christ arose from the grave! Can we be bold enough to look into the face of our ultimate adversary, admitting the impotence of our bombs, cities, governments, churches and other attempts to deny death, embracing our finitude that we might conquer it with Christ, knowing that he has conquered death? Can we bold enough to live in gentleness, knowing that through him the power of God overcame the power of death?

[The power of God is not external like human power, but eternal. Humans can apply external pressure to make a person do what they want him to do. But as for making him be what they want him to be, without destroying his freedom, only love can make this happen. Love makes it happen by creating a situation in which, of our own free will, we want to be what love wants us to be. Because God's love is not coercive and treasures our freedom, we are free to resist it, deny it, crucify it, which we do again and again. This is our terrible freedom, which love refuses to overpower so that, the greatest of all powers, God's power, is relinquished.]

Gentleness: it is the power of God. It is: submitting to God and God's purposes in your living, humility before God and people, having a teachable spirit, and following the model of the ultimate teacher, Jesus. If you are really seeking that kind of power, God's power, I have just one thing to say: ask for it. *Heaven is full of answers to prayers for which no one ever bothered to ask.*³ If you have not been walking in gentleness and power, the power of God, then maybe it is because you have never *asked* to know the power of God's gentleness. I mean really asked, deep down in your heart, expecting an answer. What have you got to lose? What have you got to hide?

Christ pledges, "I am the resurrection and the life." So go to him. What I am saying is pray; in whatever words you have, then listen: quiet your mind and listen with your heart. If your own little voice inside keeps nagging, "But I don't believe. Not really. Nothing will really happen," just keep on asking. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief." It's the best any of us can do, really. But thank God that is enough.

³Billy Graham, LEADERSHIP, Summer, 1995, 4.