

January 25, 2009  
**The Third Temptation of Christ: Power**  
**Matthew 4:8-10, Deuteronomy 6:1-12**

Satan's third temptation is the lure of power. What if I was King of the World? What if I was Prime Minister? What if I was Donald Trump? What if I could do or have what I want, when I want, with whatever I want? What if I didn't have to work? What if I could live on a tropical island with people waiting on me hand and foot? What if I had power! Sounds great, doesn't it?

*"Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely"* wrote historian, Lord Acton. As we look at issues in national and international politics and business, Acton's observation is too often true. We like to be in control - despite the headaches and stress that go with it. We know the right answers so let us make the decisions. We don't want anyone else telling us what to do. We'll be happier if we're in the top job. If we were in control, life would just be so much easier because we wouldn't have to answer to anybody else!

Those are extreme examples of power. But there is power in every relationship ...

- The child knows she wants that toy - so she begs; threatens; cleans her rooms; becomes more compliant; has a temper tantrum ... all ways to manipulate and use her power ...
- The young man is sure he knows better than his supervisor - so he goes directly to the boss to try to get his ideas implemented without trying to work with his colleagues ...
- There is tension in the marriage, so the spouses use words and actions to try to get the other partner to go along with their will ...
- The employer knows the labour market is tight, so he can threaten his employees into compliance because there is nowhere for them to go
- One person uses intimidation ...
- Another person gets overly emotional and weepy ...
- One person uses ethnicity as a barrier (but would never admit to being racist) ...
- Another uses ethnicity as a weapon ("*you have to do this, or else ...*")
- One person uses formal power structures to enhance herself and put down others
- Another person plays the "political game" - undermining people in secret to move up
- One person cannot possibly be anything but in the position of power
- Another person may not have any formal position, but feels it's his "right" to call the shots
- One person believes that because he is young, he should be the one in power
- Another person believes that because she is mature, she should have power
- One person is all talk but never does anything
- Another person is all action, but never communicates
- One person is very clear they are the power person
- Another person pretends they aren't - but really are
- One person uses the line, "*The Lord is telling me ...*" How can anyone else respond?
- Another says, "*I prayed about it, and ...*"
- One person gets angry to get their ways
- Another is sickly sweet ...

In every relationship - with at least two people - there are "power issues." They exist in marriages, families, workplaces, friendships, schools. Our challenge is to live our relationships - including the power relations within them - wisely and well. Not abuse them to get our own way. We have to learn to handle the temptation of power. We cannot avoid it ...

### *Getting to the Heart of Things ...*

Back to Matthew 4. The curious thing about Satan's temptation, is that Jesus is God! Paul reminds us that "*by (Jesus) all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" (Colossians 1:16-17). Jesus could say, "*Satan, get over it. These things aren't yours to offer.*" He would be completely right!

But Jesus chooses to reply to Satan's temptations with a quote from Deuteronomy 6. Deuteronomy records Moses' words reminding the Israelites of all the miracles God had done for them - delivering them from Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness.

Last week we read the second half of Deuteronomy 6:13-19: the Israelites had put God to the test: they thought they new better than God how things should work. They were proud - trying to force God to do what they knew He should do. Recall the antidote to pride is remembering we are God's beloved children - "*If you hold on to me for dear life, I'll get you out of any trouble. I'll give you the best of care if you'll only get to know me and trust me*" (Psalm 91:14)

In today's verses, Deuteronomy 6:1-12, Moses is warning the Israelites they can easily forget that all they have is the gift of God, the Lord, their Savior. It will be easy for them to think that they did it all - getting out of Egypt, taking over the Promised Land, inheriting all this wealth - by themselves (they are *SO* smart, *SO* brave, *SO* strong ...).

It will be easy, once they have their basic needs met to forget God. When they are not actually in trouble, they'll think they don't need Him anymore. The history of Israel is that when the people are prosperous, healthy, happy, and safe from their enemies they do forget God. It's true of a lot of us, too. When we are prosperous, healthy, happy, and safe we can forget God. We don't actively NEED help, so we drop Him out of our daytimers (or from our iphones, blackberries and other such summaries of our lives).

Jesus is reminding us we need to "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" - in bad times and in good times! We are not as all-powerful as we like to think we are. His response to the devil is a sharp reminder that God, and only God, has the power is the ultimate power in the universe. God, and only God, oversees the rise and falls of empires, kingdoms, and nations. God, and only God, has the right to power in our lives. God, and only God, is the one whom we should love, obey, and follow.

The antidote to me trying to be in control of my own life and my relationships is to remember, recognize, reassert, and re-live the truth that God, and only God, is truly power.

## *Power in Perspective*

In my life, I may think that I am well within my rights to take power - whether it is in my family, profession, whatever (As the Dad, as a pastor, as a younger person/older person ...). And, in human terms, I may have that right by virtue of my position, or education, or experience. But those human "rights" are not that important to God. God, and God alone is the source of power. My heart needs to be right with Him - I need to seek to *"Love the LORD my God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength."* How, practically, can I do that practically?

Think about what it would be like if the starting point of everyday is to come, in humility, before God bringing yourself in your weakness, powerlessness, and brokenness to Jesus.

To be honest, every part within me rebels against that! I feel that I don't need to pray. I don't want to pray. I certainly don't need to confess my sin! Yet I know, in my heart of hearts, that is exactly where I need to begin. Because it is my pride that is telling me I don't need to pray. And it is my love for power that tells me I don't need to confess my sin.

But when I do come, humbly before Jesus, acknowledging that I need His strength, His wisdom, His guidance for my relationships, for my work, for my day ... what happens? What happens is:

- In the day-by-day, moment-by-moment decisions, I don't rely on my own wisdom and strength; I silently pray for wisdom from Jesus. And He works with the experiences and the wisdom I already have to help me make better choices than I would have on my own!
- When I face crises, I don't try to fix them totally through my own power; I whisper a prayer and God works with the skills and knowledge I have to arrive at a better solution than I would have on my own. And I do it much more calmly - when God is in control.
- When I'm struggling with a relationship - if it is totally up to me I can be chippy, sharp, and nasty - driving a deep wedge between us. When I humble myself before God and ask for His help, I can be more gracious, more patient, and more loving than on my own.

Note a couple of things:

- In my experience, God rarely - "poof!" - magically gives me the wisdom or knowledge to suddenly know how to handle things. But He does sharpen what I already know and build on the wisdom I already have. God has given us minds, experiences, abilities, and skills to use and expects us to use them. But when we offer them to Him, in humility, He can do more through us than we can do on our own.
- It's not about power or control at all. It is more about submission - a willing, humble, joyful submission to God. It's about choosing to defer to His leading and His wisdom. It's about praying that His Kingdom come and His will be done - not mine. If I am concerned about "my" power or "being in control" I probably am out of sync with God. My life needs to flow with His Holy Spirit "being in control" and "His" power moving through me.
- This is a proactive way of living! When I seek to love God with all being, and seek His wisdom - for the start - I can actually avoid some difficult places where, in desperation, I cry, *"Lord, save me!"* When I do get in tight spots, I have a rich, personal relationship with Jesus already going to help me deal with them. Many of us live "reactively" -

scrambling to find our faith only during a crisis. The richer, more fulfilling way to live is to live "proactively" - cultivating a relationship with Jesus through the good times and the small challenges, so that when big problems come we have a rich faith to draw upon.

Mahatma Gandhi notes, *"Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment."* That is an astute observation. Power - to live wisely and well - really only comes from the love of God, and a love for God.

### *Success*

Abraham Lincoln astutely observed, *"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."* A few weeks back I introduced some ideas on spiritual "success" from Don Cousins. These are some qualities of character we can think about:

1. Are you being faithful? What has God given you: natural talents, material assets, education, relationships, passions, gifts. How are you using them?
2. Are you being fruitful? Evaluate yourself on the fruit of the Spirit: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23). Where does God need to prune?
3. Are you fulfilled? Are you full of ... JOY! In Scripture those who are faithful and fruitful experience joy.
4. Are you making God famous? Do people see God in you and through you? Do you do what you do for His Kingdom, or for yourself?

If we see ourselves growing in these areas, we probably can feel like we are moving toward the ideal of *"Loving God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength."* These characteristics can grow in no other way. When we proactively seek to live the love of God, most often we can count on doing the right things, for the right reasons, with the right heart. If we are not progressing on these points, we may need to take stock of where we are. Are we satisfied with how we're doing? Are we joyful? Or is there a restless dis-ease? What are we going to do about it?

The power of love can overthrow the love of power - in our lives, and in our world. *"I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God."* (Ephesians 3:16-18)

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