

KILLIN' IT
“EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT”

"I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." 1 Corinthians 2:4

A city boy goes to buy a chainsaw to cut down trees in his backyard, but it doesn't work very well. The first day, he cuts down five trees with his new chainsaw. The second day only two trees and by the third day he only cuts down one tree even though he works really hard all day. He takes it back to the chainsaw store to return it, and just to make sure it's working, the shop owner starts the chainsaw up, to which the city slicker says, "What's that noise?"

I can't imagine how hard it would be to cut any tree down with a heavy chain saw without starting it up! That's the whole point of putting an engine onto a saw – to give you the power you need to cut down trees *FAST*.

We want power at our fingertips. We count on the electricity to power our furnaces (this time of year), air conditioners (in the summer), TV's, light bulbs, and refrigerators. We expect that power to be on *all* the time, and when it goes out, even for a few seconds, we complain about having to reset all those annoying blinking clocks on the stove, and microwave.

Any gas station and convenience mart has *energy drinks*. These are cans of liquid power for your body, with names like "Full Throttle," and "Amp." If you're not into that, we drink coffee to get us going in the morning and then keep us in caffeinated hyper-activity all day long. Just look at the long lines at the Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks drive thru's any time of day.

In our world, success, wealth, and power go hand-in-hand. Our world tells us to get it, grab all the power you can. And then show it off by wearing the clothes, driving the cars, living in the right neighborhoods that exude power and money.

There is a, who studies the impact of power on human character. He says that power can actually be hazardous to your moral health. The strangest things happen when people get just a little power. There was a study done by professor, Dacher Keltner, where people were put in groups of three and one person was randomly appointed to be the leader of that group of three. Then, they brought out four cookies for those three people. Do you want to guess who almost always assumed that they are entitled to eat the extra cookie? It's whoever has been appointed the leader of that group. Apparently, having power means getting the extra cookie. We all want power, we all get some power, but we all misuse it, and a misuse of power is, "I will use power to get my own way."

We see everyday the abuse of power in government, in businesses, in finance, and even in the church. At the core of the misuse of power is that I think power is about me getting my will to be done. Studies have shown that people who receive power become more insensitive. They become more impulsive. Other people are constantly being nice to them, so they actually lose their ability to read other people accurately. Obtaining power tends to do something to your state of mind so that you treat people differently.

In this series of sermons called Killing It, we've seen how we live in a society where we highly value success at all costs. You have to be crushing it with your achievements and financially, and how you look, and all of that creates a pressure that is killing us.

2000 years ago, people went to the city of Corinth because they wanted to make money. Corinth sat in this spot where it was the crossroads of trade so you could make a lot of money there. It was a place associated with pursuit for wealth, status, and power.

St. Paul, however, came to that place in the strangest of ways. He came in weakness, and in fear, and trembling. No fancy powerful speeches. He came empty of all power, except the power *in* the message of the Gospel he was proclaiming. He said, "***I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.***" *1 Corinthians 2:2* To talk about Jesus crucified was so odd. Everybody knew what crucifixion was, but it was objectionable,

repulsive, not to be mentioned in polite company. A crucified man was by definition defeated, powerLESS. Who in the world talks like that and acts like that?

You see Paul was bringing *another* kind of power. He's convinced he has discovered a kind of power that now is available for the lowly and the needy and the least and the lost and the last. This is the almighty power of God. God, in His power and love, turns this world and what we value upside down!

God's power is unlike any other. In power God made all the universe, the earth, stars, and galaxies. God's power is unlimited; He is omni-potent. Power in our world is often turned inward, selfishly for personal gain. God's power is the opposite. His power and His love are intricately linked together. Why did God make the universe? Just to show off His power? Just because He *could*? No! He made the universe, all that exists, all living things to be recipients of His love. God, with His power, formed you, put you together in a way so amazing that modern science can't even understand. He created you so that He can love you, and you can know Him and His love.

Then God in His power stooped down from heaven to take on human flesh and bones in the person of Jesus. He did not come in glory and heavenly power. He looked like a regular guy, but when love called for it, Jesus showed almighty power by calming the storm with just a word; raising the dead; healing the incurably sick, and feeding thousands of hungry people. And yet Jesus' amazing power was always only used in loving service to bless others, not for His own advantage, or to build His ego.

God's greatest demonstration of power *ever* was shown in Jesus' death on the cross. There Jesus appeared anything BUT powerful and victorious. He didn't resist, didn't fight back when Roman might condemned Him to a torture only reserved for the lowest of the low. A bruised, beat-up, bloody man was nailed to the wooden beams, humiliated for all to see his weakness. Then His body hung lifeless and He was taken down and laid in a tomb. But in a paradox that seems absolutely absurd, this is God's most

powerful victory! There on the cross Jesus defeated death. There He took down sin. There God OVERpowered the principalities and powers of darkness. How strange! How upside-down that God in His power would do this to set you free, to make you His, to win for you the gift of eternal heaven with Him! And to do all this for people like us whose hearts are constantly set on rejecting Him!

This is the GOOD news, the Gospel. The Gospel is not flashy in terms of this world. How God went about winning this victory for you appears weak, and empty, and despised by a world that craves might and status, fame and pleasure. But THIS is how God in His love works. This is why Paul wrote, ***"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes"***

Romans 1:16 The word "power" here is the word for "dynamite." This seemingly upside down and absurd story is the truth of God's all powerful love! Paul had seen this power at work with His own eyes when thousands and thousands of people turned to faith in Jesus Christ, their Savior. Paul had seen God create communities of new believers, churches, all over. All by the power of this true Gospel of God's loving power in Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

All of us have probably seen the little pink rabbit who bangs the bass drum. The idea is that if you buy these energizer brand batteries your flashlights, and radios, and smoke alarms keep their power. As the commercials say, "They keep on ... going, and going, and going."

Would you like to have a long-lasting battery you could slip inside of you to power your life? We need power to get up and go, power to stick to your diet, power to improve your health, power to stop drinking, power to stand up to someone and defend yourself.

Did you know that you also need power spiritually, to believe in Jesus and receive His gifts to you? Paul writes in this Bible passage that he came to them in weakness, and fear and trembling. It was real clear that Paul didn't, and couldn't have, changed the hearts and minds of those people there to come to faith in Jesus. Paul didn't have *any* power – it was ALL Jesus! All the power in this wonderful message of Jesus. And Paul goes on to say the same is

true for you, and all people everywhere. He writes for us: ***"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."*** 1 Corinthians 1:14

He's saying that not only have you sinned and offended God and stand deserving of an eternity without Jesus in the tortures of hell, but that even with Jesus saving you in His dying in your place on the cross to pay for *your* sins, even though you hear this strange paradoxical Good News, still, you don't have it in you to even believe. Look at these words again! ***"The natural person* [that's you and anyone else who does not trust Christ, God is not alive in their heart in mind, they are just a natural person] ***does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them* [God destroying sin and death by dying as a defeated, crucified criminal makes NO sense to anyone on their own, -- unless GOD works in them to bring them to faith in Christ] ***because they are spiritually discerned."*** 1 Corinthians 1:14****

You see, we, by nature, can't stop ourselves from always trying to insert into our relationship with God our own ingenuity, our own will power, our own ability to reason it out ourselves. This is our ruined, corrupted, sinful condition.

Very many of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other churches falsely believe and teach that you are like a run-down battery that still has a little bit of power left in you. You can't do much but your spiritual battery still has enough charge to give you the power to decide for yourself to follow Jesus or reject Him. God tells us, however, that by nature you can't decide for God, you're unable, and you wouldn't want to follow Jesus because it makes no sense – to give up living for comfort, and wealth, and status, and control over people. Who would do THAT? Following Jesus is *spiritually discerned* - we need the power of God-given spiritual life to even understand and desire God.

Case in point, Paul in today's first Scripture lesson. He was living full throttle to capture and kill Christians. He was giving his life totally to destroy the work of Jesus. Then, bam-o, he is on a road

when Jesus came to him. Jesus chose him, turned his life completely around, and *then* Paul could understand. *Then* Paul got this got what grace means, and he was never the same again.

Other Christians in other churches falsely teach that you have to insert your own power into your relationship with God, not by choosing Jesus, but by doing good things. Lots, and lots, and lots of good things. Grace to these folks isn't forgiveness from the cross free and clear. No, grace is an energizing battery that gives you the umph to do good things, that earn points with God, and the more points you earn the fewer sins you have to pay for yourself by spending millions of years doing time in purgatory. That's so messed up!

Paul blows this power-grab out of the water too. He writes for us, "***I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.***" *Romans 7:19* You can't live a good life to earn your way up to heaven! It's impossible. Even believers on earth keep living with daily sins. We really NEED God's power. Not partial power. But ALL the way! 100%!

And that's the point! That's the point always! God's love is so, so great that He wants to EMPOWER you.

Last week Tuesday and Wednesday the temperature got wonderfully warm – that is for January in Ohio. People were outside enjoying the break from the cold, walking, and lots of people out for a run. Now, I have a bad ankle and I can't run. But when I see these people out in their spandex clothing, looking strong, and fit, and sleek, I can't help but think they are just showing off! They're just showing off -- because I sure can't do that.

If you were going to be a serious runner, your nutrition would be very important, don't you think? You need good minerals and vitamins coming into your body to give you the fuel to burn. How likely is it that you would change your diet to only junk food? Not very likely! No! You have to get RID of the junk foods, STOP eating junk foods in order to have the nutrition to seriously run.

God's love is so, so great that He wants to EMPOWER you. And the way that this happens is that you must give up your trust in

your own power. Like turning away from junk food, Empty yourself of confidence in your goodness. Turn completely away from trusting in yourself. See yourself for who you are – just a sinner, just a person begging for mercy from Jesus. Come to God empty handed and trust totally completely in the cross. The cross – the cross – this is THE power of God!

At the cross Jesus didn't just TEACH you about suffering – No, He suffered your penalty in *your place for you*. At the cross Jesus didn't just SHOW you how to live and die – No, His dying put death to death and won for you life everlasting. He did it ALL. He saves you 100%. He doesn't leave you in the uncertainty of wondering if you've done your part.

This is why we spoke earlier these words: ***“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”*** Luther's Small Catechism. Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed

It's the power of the Gospel. The Gospel – the great, amazing truth of God's love for me – for you – is so, so good, that I am drawn to faith. God works in me to bring me to faith in Jesus. This too is a gift of God! God empowering you. God is stronger than your sin. He breaks through, to work in you a believing heart and mind. He “enlightens” you – the light bulb goes on. “OH, NOOOWWW I get how much God must love me!” He even “sanctifies and keeps” you – empowers you to live in His peace, His joy, in confidence that you are His now and ever more!

Just as our God empowers you personally, He also gives His power to US, to His Church. Sometimes in Churches we get it wrong. We rely on gimmicks and tricks. We select leaders based on the values of world – so we pick leaders who have money, and looks, and charm, and status. Then they bring into Christ's family methods of powering up on people, and we rely on ourselves. Who needs God's power when we are so smart and savvy and connected that we really don't need -- or want -- a relationship of trusting God alone?!

And so God reminds us all: ***“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”*** *Zechariah 4:6* By God’s power! His power alone! This is why we must all always come to God with humble confession of our sins, with admitting our uncaring, unfeeling hearts. This is why we pray and pray and pray and pray some more for lives to be turned around and souls to be saved. This is why we intake the good nutrition of Bible study in the Word. It’s not our doing that counts for anything. It’s God’s power. His working.

So friends, when you trust God’s power alone, when your faith is anchored only in the power of the Good news of the cross of Jesus, then you have all you need. You are no longer worried and wondering, “Have I done enough?” “Have I done the right things?” “Did I really mean it sincerely?”

No, turn completely to the Gospel. The Gospel is the truth of God’s power and love on the cross that has forgiven and saved you. Paul says, ***“... Your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”*** *1 Corinthians 2:4* Faith that is based – not on our power or looks or status or anything else that we value in this world – but faith based on Jesus gives you confidence that you are loved and heaven bound, gives you certainty of your eternal future, gives you the confidence you need, and sets your heart at rest.

Friends, God’s power, His mighty love is here today – and for YOU! EMPTY yourself of relying on your strength. And TRUST in the power of Jesus cross completely. Amen.