

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
January 1, 2012 – First Sunday after Christmas

Mighty God
1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25; 2 Corinthians 11:21b-33; 12:1-10

For Advent and Christmas this year, we've been focusing on the great messianic names that are found in Is. 9: For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*. The first week, we looked at the name "Everlasting Father" – God is profoundly personal. The following week, we looked at "Wonderful Counselor" – the Messiah as the source of truth, wisdom, and encouragement. Then we looked at "Prince of Peace" – the Messiah is to embody the Hebrew concept of shalom, which means the absence of conflict, as well as healing, wholeness, and fulfillment. Today, we'll look at the title "Mighty God" - the Messiah is to have power to overcome evil and even death.

Power is an interesting concept. Everyone wants power, a sense of control. After all, who's immune to the lure of power? It's something we all want – no one wants to be powerless. And we want to empower our children and loved ones, too.

But there's a problem with power. It was Lord Acton who wrote: "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." It's a problem that permeates all levels of our culture, from corporate boardrooms to athletic fields to schools. It's why our young people feel so much pressure to hang out with the "cool" kids in class, because they're the ones who hold the reins of power at school.

Power itself is a neutral word really, but all too often it's spoiled by what we do with it. When we become too preoccupied with power, that kind of fascination can cause a great deal of harm.

First, power can deceive you by making you feel that no one has a right to criticize or correct you. This morning we've read two passages that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The Corinthian church was the biggest, wealthiest, most successful church Paul ever established. Hence, they thought that God must be blessing them and must be on their side because people were filling their pews and their finances were healthy, so other churches didn't have a right to criticize them. Power can tend to isolate you and make you feel that other people have no right to question anything you do. You can lose the sense of your need for others.

Secondly, power by its nature can be so intoxicating that it can become the center of your life. That's what happened to the Corinthians –

they replaced Jesus Christ with their love of power as their center. For instance, power from mystical, spiritual experiences. They began to judge people on the basis of this blessing – if people didn't speak in tongues, for instance, then they were looked down upon.

And third, power can also deceive you into thinking that you should judge others by different standards than those given by God. The Corinthians began judging people on the basis of what they considered to be the most important criteria. So, for instance, they judged Paul by the fact that he hadn't had as many mystical experiences as they'd had – which by the way, he denies; he says he's actually had more spiritual experiences than any of them.

Power tends to create its own criteria by which to judge others. What the Corinthians have done is to select one fruit of God's blessing and use that fruit to judge others. In so doing they created a myth that unless you lived up to this particular standard of judgment, you were not deemed truly spiritual.

It reminds me of a section in the book The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It's a great novel – I thought I was doing pretty well to have read it once, since it's over 900 pages long. Then I found out that Ray Allen, our music director, has read this book at least 7 times!

In The Brothers Karamazov, there's an interesting section that involves the main character Alyosha. This young Christian was a very devout person, and his hero was Father Zossima, a saintly man from the monastery in town who Alyosha loved and looked up to.

As the novel unfolds, Zossima dies. It turns out there's a myth that had been created and that Alyosha has bought into. It's a crazy myth, and yet everybody believed it, and it just about destroys Alyosha's faith. The myth was this: if you were truly a great saint when you died, before they buried you, they would lay your body in a coffin and leave it in a room, and your body would have a sweet smell. On the other hand, if you were not a great saint, your body would have a foul smell.

It was, of course, a complete falsehood. But Alyosha believed it. So when Father Zossima died, Alyosha, who was so devout, thought, "Oh, now that he's dead, we'll put his body in his coffin, and since he was such a great man, his body will smell like flowers for many days, and then we'll bury him." Instead, within hours, the body began to smell with a horrible, foul smell of death, the worst that anybody could ever remember. In fact, the chapter is titled "The Odour of Corruption." And Father Zossima was discredited.

Then Alyosha discovered that there were many other monks that really secretly hated Zossima because they were jealous of his saintliness, and now they took advantage of this to discredit him in front of everyone, calling him a fraud and not a great saint because his body smelled bad. And Alyosha loses his faith for awhile.

Look what happened: there was a false criteria that was established by which to judge others, and that false criteria just about causes Alyosha to lose his faith. That's what has happened at Corinth – a false criteria has been established, a criteria of Corinthian power, and the Apostle Paul has to grapple with it.

So how does Paul address this issue? He starts out by meeting the Corinthians where they are. They want to boast of their power? Paul can boast with the best of them: “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked, and frequently in danger.” (11:22-27)

The Corinthians want to boast about their mystical experiences? Paul's even had those, and his experience took him to the highest heaven possible. In Ch. 12, he describes a person (most scholars believe he's referring to himself) who was caught up in the third heaven. Ernest Best notes: "The Jews believed in a plurality of heavens, usually seven in number but sometimes three as here. The third heaven is then the highest heaven reached by passing through the other two."¹ So Paul makes it clear that their accusations against him are unfounded. Paul has the credentials to boast with the best and the most powerful of the Corinthians.

But then Paul surprises the Corinthians: he says, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (11:30). The Corinthians are certainly stunned to hear that from Paul, because weakness is the thing they hate.

But Paul pushes his point: "My power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9). Even at the beginning of 1 Corinthians Paul made the same point: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the

¹ Ernest Best, Interpretation Commentary Second Corinthians, 116

called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18ff)

Paul has turned the Corinthians’ logic upside down. He has given us the beginnings of a whole new theology of power.

Earl Palmer says, “Power in the New Testament is not something you get to have and get to use over and against other people or for yourself. It’s not an energy source you get to use. Power in the New Testament is your assurance that Jesus Christ has the power.”

That’s a big difference. That’s not a power you can manipulate to use over against others. It’s a power that doesn’t do harm to others, but a power that sets us free from sin and evil and death. It’s the power that gives us life.

In the summer of 2010, Tony Campolo spoke at the Presbyterian Youth Triennium. I want to show you a clip where he talks about what the power of God is like: [Show Tony Campolo Triennium 2010 video clip: <http://sites.google.com/site/presbyterianyouthtriennium/resources/sermon-videos/rev-dr-tony-campolo---july-24-2010>]

Jesus Christ modeled a whole new way to look at power. Things may look dark on Friday, but remember, Sunday’s coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.