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POWER PLAY

1 John 3:11-18

What do you need to be fully alive? To really live we have to have some power. To be totally powerless is miserable, no way at all to live. With no power we cannot protect ourselves, nor can we do anything to get what we want in life. We think that’s a recipe for a very unhappy existence. Today I am going to talk about power. What movie character is able to use the power of the Force and the power of potassium? Bananakin Skywalker. This week I saw great bit of wisdom from a paraphrase of *Spiderman*. With great power comes...great electricity bills.

Our culture is obsessed with power. We hear so often about “empowerment.” People feel if they have no power, they are somehow invalidated as human beings and certain to be afflicted and dissatisfied. They feel they are oppressed. As a result, we see great struggles for power being played out. Philosopher Bertrand Russell said, “The fundamental concept in social science is power.” In other words, down at the root of all that is going on in society is the struggle for power. We think of power as the ability to control and to make happen the things you want to happen. The holidays are coming, and I’ve been thinking of putting up my old electric train under the Christmas tree. I won’t want it to just sit there under the tree. I will want to make it go around the track. To make that happen I need power. I have to plug the transformer into an electric outlet. The electric power moves the train around the track. We long for power to make life move the way we want it to. Power is often about control. I want that electric power to control the train. We want power to control people and things so that they go the way we want in life.

However, so much of our lives are about relationships, and when we are focused on power and control in relationships we end up with conflict. One man said, “Power never takes a step back except in the face of more power.” So life becomes about getting enough power that you don’t have to step back in the face of someone else’s power. Life and relationships then become an unending power struggle. That is the opposite of peace. It doesn’t take great insight to realize if there is ever to be peace among people, we need another way to live. Swiss Physician and author, Paul Tournier said, “The modern myth of power has greatly impoverished our civilization. It has deprived it of all values that lie beyond the search for power.” He says the power people are seeking is a myth, and he’s right. The obsession with that illusion is destroying people. That’s a message our culture desperately needs to hear, but sadly it is completely deaf to it.

For you to be alive in the fullest way possible you do need power. Today I want to “empower” you, but I am going to point you to a very different kind of power, a power that cannot be defeated, that never has to take a step back in the face of another’s power. It is a power that we can exercise at every moment of our lives in every situation we encounter, with every person. But I warn you, it is not power as we think of it. We think of power as the ability to control events and to make things happen in the world. But God is aiming at something different. That’s because he doesn’t need us to control events and make things happen. He already does that! He wants to do something magnificent, something grand with us, something much more awesome than exercising power as the world sees it.

We get an idea of what this real power is by asking, who is the most powerful person who has ever lived? I submit to you that having power is about having an effect, making a difference. The person who has had more effect on the world and made more difference than any other single person is Jesus Christ. He has the most power the world has ever seen. But he used it in a most unusual way. In 1 John 3:11-18 we get a glimpse of this power.

PREMISE: The power that we need most is the power of love.

This is the power that Jesus Christ exercised. He had divine power, the ability to control and effect things. There were glimpses of that power when he stopped a storm in its tracks, when he miraculously made a small amount of food multiply into a feast for thousands of people, when he ordered a dead Lazarus to live again, when he himself walked out of his own tomb after being dead for a couple of days. He had the power to do whatever he wanted. He had power over nature itself.

But the power that Jesus exercised that changed the world was the power of love. He loved people to the point that he died for us all. He had more than enough power to stop his death from happening if he wanted to. But he chose to die because it was the only way we could be rescued from the judgment that we have all earned and reunited with God, the source of all good and all true life.

In verse 11 John spells it out. “This is the message you have heard from the beginning. We should love one another.” Love is what Jesus did, and that’s what he commanded us to do. In verse 16 John said we can know what love is by looking at Jesus Christ and how he laid down his life for us. This is the way to be as powerful as Jesus. Love the way Jesus loved.

There is no power on earth as great as love. Love changes people. It is love that gives hope and strength and joy. It is love that inspires and encourages. The absence of love destroys our souls, but the presence of love fills our lives with health and meaning and joy. Why is a wedding the biggest event in our lives? Because we celebrate that day that one person loves us above all else, and that is the most joyful, life changing and life giving thing that could ever happen. And love, this incredible force, is unstoppable. No matter how much power others have, they cannot stop us from loving. We can love no matter what they do. Love does not have to back down, take a step back in the face of great power, ever.

But people in our culture are very confused about love. What does it mean to love others? What is love? In this passage John shows us what love really is and what it does. He tells us what it means to love like Jesus did.

LOVE IS NOT FOCUSED ON SELF

John gives us a negative example. He says in verse 12, “Do not be like Cain.” Cain was supposed to love his brother, Abel. Instead he killed him. That act was the opposite of loving. What happened there? The story is familiar. Cain was the first son of Adam and Eve. He was a farmer, growing crops. His younger brother, Abel, was a rancher who kept flocks and herds. At one point both of them brought some of the fruits of their labor to offer as sacrifices to God.

That’s where things went sideways. Genesis 4:4-5 says, “The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry.” Uh oh. God said, “Good job, Abel,” but when it came to Cain there was no pat on the back. How do you think that went over? Cain felt that most awful thing. In his mind he was rejected, and that was unbearable.

Why did God reject Cain’s sacrifice? Some people have claimed that Abel’s sacrifice was better because God demanded animal sacrifices and Cain only brought some of his crops. However, later in the law of Moses God included offerings of grain and other crops as acceptable sacrifices. Cain was bringing the produce of his work, which is what God would want him to do, so that doesn’t seem like it’s the problem.

We need to pay attention to what the story actually says. God looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but not on Cain and his. It wasn’t so much the offering that was the problem. It was the person. God did not look on Cain with favor, and that affected his offering as well. Why would God not look on Cain with favor? It was because of what God could see about his heart. In verse 7 God said to Cain, “Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” God could see that there was something bad going on with Cain, and he needed to deal with it. As long as there was an issue with Cain’s heart his sacrifice was never going to be acceptable to God.

Suppose you are at an outdoor wedding on a very warm summer day. This, of course, is back in the good old days when we could have public events attended by many people. Ah, those were the days. It’s hot, and you need something cool to drink. Fortunately, they have a couple of punch bowls set out where guests can help themselves to a refreshing fruit punch. So you go to one of the bowls to ladle out a cup of punch, but there floating in the bowl is a dead fly. Will you go ahead and get some punch, just avoiding the fly? No way. Everything that comes out of that bowl is contaminated by that fly, so you’ll go looking for another punch bowl. Cain had dead flies in his heart, and that contaminated everything that came out of it, including his sacrifice. So God went to Abel’s punch bowl.

We can know there was a problem with Cain’s heart by his response to what he considered an unmitigated affront by God. Cain murdered his brother to get him out of the way. This is an example of the irrationality of sin. If Cain wasn’t acceptable to God because of the bad attitude in his heart, did he think killing his innocent brother was going to help? Did he see this whole thing as a sort of competition that he had lost, but if he took Abel out, there would be no more competition so God would have to accept his offering, since he had now eliminated the competition?

It got worse. When God came around looking for Abel, Cain lied and uttered his famous words, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Right, Cain. You’ve just wiped out one quarter of the world’s population. Do you think God’s not going to notice that? Or did you think God is a terrible detective? Let’s see there are now only 3 possible suspects. Abel was beaten to death, so we can probably eliminate the female suspect. We’re down to 2, suspects, and one of them had means, opportunity and motive. But you think Detective Yahweh couldn’t figure that out?

What was the problem with Cain? He was supposed to be worshiping God. That was the point of offering a sacrifice. But he made the whole thing about himself. His pride was wounded, his feelings were hurt, and that was all that mattered. It made him so angry he had to make sure that never happened again, and he did. Abel couldn’t show him up now, because he was dead.

Instead of loving and honoring God, and as a result, loving his own brother, Cain was about loving and honoring himself, and that was what led to the tragedy of this story. In 1 Corinthians 13:5 Paul wrote that love, “is not self-seeking.” It is not about itself. But Cain had made the whole thing about himself. You might think, “Yes, I can see that, but I don’t do anything like that.” Not so fast. We all do it, at least to some degree.

Years ago in my previous church I preached a sermon on a passage that was somewhat tricky. I worked hard at understanding the passage, and I felt I had some insight into it that cleared it up. It opened up the verses and led to a powerful point. It was a hard sermon to deliver, but I felt like I’d done pretty well with it. After the last service a member of the congregation spoke to me and told me that he had heard a very well-known megachurch pastor speak on this same passage. He proceeded to rhapsodize about how magnificent that pastor’s sermon was and how it had such great impact on him. He went on about it at some length. I have to confess that though I didn’t say anything to the man, inside I was thinking, “What about what I just said?” In other words, though ostensibly I preached that sermon to serve God and to minister to others, in effect to love them, at that point I made it about me. I made it about wanting to have my efforts and my insights validated and affirmed.

Love isn’t about ourselves. It is about caring for the other person. So real love takes our personal selfish interest totally out of the equation. Jesus did not choose to allow himself to be executed because it would be good for him. He did it because it was good for others.

We have some subtle ways of making love about ourselves. One of the obvious ways we do that is we make love a quid pro quo deal. I’m willing to love another person as long as I get something out of it. The person has to at least give something back. But that is not really love. That’s just negotiating and making a deal. We calculate whether what we get from the person warrants what we have to give. The focus, then, is really on ourselves. With real love the question, “what about me?” never enters into the equation. It isn’t about me, it’s about putting the other person first and serving them, so what I get is irrelevant.

Whenever our focus is on ourselves, we are not loving others. It is pretty much an either/or thing. You can love them, or you can focus on you, you can’t do both at the same time. Cain was focused on himself, and he serves as a warning that when we do that there is no end to the evil we can rationalize and do.

LOVE ACTS

In verse 18 John says, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” In other words, talk is cheap. It is easy to say we love someone, but the real test of how genuine our love is, comes down to what we do, not what we say, think or feel. In verse 17 John said if we have material possessions and we see a brother or sister in need and we do nothing about it, how can the love of God be in us? Clearly it can’t be. Whatever that is, it is not love.

Why did Jesus come into this world and subject himself to the suffering that he endured? That most famous verse, John 3:16, says God did that because he loved the world so much. He looked at the human race and saw people suffering, estranged from him, as a result living in frustration, emptiness, and hopelessness. Because he loved, he acted. He had to do something, and so he entered this world to rescue all of us.

Recently at the end of a day in the early evening I was tired and I wanted to watch a particular football game that was on TV. I turned the game on and was enjoying it. But as I was watching I could not help noticing that Laurie was in the kitchen preparing dinner. That was not an unusual thing. She wasn’t complaining. But I knew she was tired. She had mentioned several times during the day how tired she was. I love Laurie with all my heart. As I was flopped there on the couch watching a football game while she worked, I began to feel uneasy. It hit me that it was easy to say I love her, but if I really loved her, I would do something to help her. So, I suggested instead of cooking dinner she call Door Dash. Just kidding. I got up from the couch, walked away from the television into the kitchen, and asked what I could do to help. Yes, it took me away from my game. But a funny thing happened. I found that being there with her made me feel better than watching the game. I was, in a very small way, loving in action, not just in words. I knew that just my being there with her made her happy, and that made me happy.

We struggle with the idea that love is a feeling. If I don’t feel loving toward someone maybe because they’re not likeable, I might feel unloving. But love is more about what we do. Jesus did not feel fondness toward the people who tortured him, were responsible for putting him on a cross, who mocked him and celebrated as he was dying. But he loved them by choosing to die even for them.

John’s statement in verse 17 presents us with something of a problem. If we have possessions and we see a brother or sister in need, and we don’t do anything to help them, then God’s love is not in us. Do you see any brothers or sisters in need? How could you not? They’re everywhere. The needs are overwhelming and they are ever present. There are infinitely more needs than my resources could ever begin to address. I could give all of my money, sell all my possessions and give that money and I could use all my time trying to help, and it wouldn’t even make a dent in all the needs I see. It’s downright paralyzing, because I can do so little that it is easy to default to why even try? What are we supposed to do? While preparing for this sermon I talked with a friend who has an exceedingly difficult situation. I was frustrated because the needs of his situation are far greater than I could do anything about. Am I just supposed to give this friend everything I have, even though it won’t solve the problem?

There is no easy, pat answer for this one. But there is something that can help us sort it out. How do we know when we have done enough? Look at Jesus. When you read the story of his life you see him healing many people. There were a couple of occasions when he brought children who had died back to life. But he didn’t heal every sick person in the world. He didn’t bring every child who died back to life. He didn’t calm every storm. He didn’t miraculously feed every crowd that came to hear him speak.

How did Jesus decide who to heal? Here’s how he chose. He listened to the Father. His life seemed to almost move randomly. Out of the blue he engaged a somewhat disreputable Samaritan woman in conversation, in John 5 in Jerusalem there was an area where there were many blind, lame and paralyzed people, and he picked one paralyzed man to engage, and healed him. He said he was not going to go to a feast, but then he later went. He suddenly stopped to call on Zaccheus, one of the most despised men in town, to follow him. He walked on water. He did things you would never expect. But it wasn’t random. He listened to the voice of the Father and did whatever the Father said. In John 5:36 he said he did the works that the Father had given him to finish. In John 12:49 Jesus said, “I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.” That’s how he determined what he should say, and who and when he should heal people. He followed the Father.

We will have to do the same. We cannot meet all the needs of the entire world. We can’t even meet all the needs of the people we know. But we can do what the Father tells us to do. We don’t need to do everything, we just need to do what God tells us to do. In order to do that we will have to do two things. First, recognize our own “me first” tendency. We all have it. We have a tendency to feather our own nest, enrich ourselves, make life more comfortable for ourselves first, even though others around us may have huge needs. We need to tell God that everything we have belongs to him, and it is his prerogative how it is to be used. In other words, be careful about excusing ourselves from the need to help.

Second, we need to have open ears and tender hearts. We need to listen and let God put on our hearts what he wants us to do. This is different from being driven by guilt. It is learning to discern when God is putting something on our hearts and also learning not to ignore it when he speaks. It is me lying on the couch watching a football game and getting the sense that I needed to love my wife by helping her.

There is no formula for this, there are no steps to follow. It simply requires that we keep asking God what he wants us to do, how and who he wants us to actively live, then commit ourselves to responding when God tells us to love and to act. It is listening for his voice and asking him to speak to us. God is more than capable of touching our hearts, so if we listen and ask him to work, he will do it. I have found that if I ask and pay attention, God will indeed put on my heart things he wants me to do to love others. I just need to respond when he does.

LOVE SACRIFICES

We’ve already noted this, but verse 16 really spells it out. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” In John 15:13 Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” The pinnacle of love is sacrificing one’s very life, as Jesus did, for others, because love always involves sacrifice. This is the inevitable, logical result of love not being about self.

Love always involves sacrifice. Always. Love is costly. Love is choosing to seek the good of another person before your own good. By definition, then, love involves sacrifice. It means giving up something for yourself in order to seek the good of another. If it doesn’t cost you anything, if you don’t have to give up anything, it is not love.

I’m embarrassed to confess that, in our efforts to find something to watch on television that isn’t offensive and crude, we ended up watching a movie that had all the hallmarks of a Hallmark movie, which I suppose it originally was. It was called *Christmas In Mississippi*. I know, even the title sounds like a joke, or yawn fest at best. We watched it because we have a little sort of nostalgic connection to Mississippi after Carissa and Michael lived there for 3 plus years. The movie followed the very predictable trajectory of the Hallmark genre. The young woman who is the central character returns at Christmas time to her home town of Gulfport, Mississippi where she encounters the former boyfriend who broke her heart. You can fill in the blanks from there. But in the plot there were some things that actually illustrated important truth. The love interest, the former boyfriend, had established a life and begun a career in Nashville. But his brother, who was married and had a son, was in the Army. Life gave him some real hardship. His wife died, and then he was ordered to deploy overseas. So the former boyfriend gave up his life and career in Nashville to move back to Gulfport to take care of his nephew. He sacrificed his plans and dreams in order to love his brother and his nephew. That’s what love does. The leading woman faces a crisis because, of course, sparks fly, the romance is kindled, and love blossoms with her ex. But then she is offered her dream job in Los Angeles. She knows she loves the guy, but he must stay in Gulfport. She has to choose. In the end she sacrifices the job because she loves him. They didn’t execute it perfectly. They hedged a little. But down at the bottom of it, the message was the same. Love sacrifices.

In fact, in much of what comes out of Hollywood these days, that is the message that they don’t get. They want to have love relationships but see the career or self interest as more important. They don’t want to sacrifice self for another person. That’s not love. Love is always costly, it always involves sacrifice.

Recently our granddaughters were staying with us for a few days. At one point they were playing with Barbies. Somehow we have this collection of 30 year old Barbie dolls left over from Carissa’s childhood, and they love playing with them. Among the Barbies is a Ken doll. Ella began pestering me to come be Ken. I didn’t want to be Ken. I didn’t want to play with Barbie dolls. I enter into all manner of activities with those little girls, but for some reason, that one just felt like a bridge too far. I resisted for a while, but then I realized if I really love these little girls it will involve sacrifice. In this case it kind of felt like it was going to cost me my man card. I agreed, but just as I entered into the fray the girls got diverted onto something else. I was saved. But I suspect someday I will have to cross that bridge again. I am doomed to be Ken I fear.

Loving children involves immense sacrifice. I’ve watched our kids going through being parents and discovering that nothing can prepare you for how much sacrifice is involved in loving the kids.

When I counsel young couples about to get married I tell them they need to tell each other, you are more important to me than my job, my career, my hobbies, my friends, even my family. You come first. If they don’t say that they don’t actually love the other person. We need to remember that love will always cost something. It is not convenient. If we only love in ways that are convenient, we aren’t loving at all.

APPLICATION

BE EXCITED ABOUT LOVE

Loving others is the most powerful, impactful, world changing thing that we can do. Jesus, a most unlikely person, a no name woodworker from a nothing town in a lightly regarded corner of the world, literally revolutionized the entire world, the history of the human race. He did it by loving more than anything else. Keep in mind the power that love has. We can have huge impact on other people by loving them. Nothing can stop us from loving them, and love will have its effect. Love is life giving.

Remember that love is what you were created to do. God made us to love and serve others. If we hope to experience fullness of life, love is crucial to it. It is the way we truly come alive.

DON’T MAKE IT ABOUT YOURSELF

The default of human nature, our natural bent that pulls on us 24 hours every day of our lives, is to make everything about ourselves. We have this nearly irresistible pull to serve ourselves. But love is not self seeking. Think of a spectrum with polar opposites at either end. At one end is serving self, at the other is loving. You cannot do both at the same time. To the degree that you are serving self you are not loving.

I read an article from ESPN this week about Nick Foles, who currently is the quarterback of the Chicago Bears NFL team. Foles has had an unusual career arc. He is maligned by many and broadly considered at best a backup quality player. Yet he has been an All Pro quarterback and has been the Super Bowl MVP. The article said that most people miss what is most important about him. That is the kind of person he is, how much he cares about people and what a great leader he is as a result. His teammates and coaches love him. He is a follower of Jesus, and so he loves others. One longtime coach who has had him as a player says that he has never seen another player as committed to helping others as Foles. He says he often does it to his own detriment, but the coach says, “he has such concern for other people. He doesn’t have a selfish bone in his body.” That is a person who evidently knows what love is.

Here’s an important thing about serving self. Though it feels to us like it is essential to fullness of life, it is in fact the opposite. We get fullness of life through the polar opposite, through loving. There is something that you likely have at least a nagging sense of that you need to remember. It is that serving self is an infinitely deep hole that you can never fill. It will only leave you frustrated, longing for more, wondering why nothing is ever enough. You will never find satisfaction in serving yourself. That’s because God created you to love.

DRINK FROM GOD’S LOVE

During the recent hot, dry weather we had I had an interesting experience. The skin on my face got extremely dry and flaky. I put some skin lotion on it, but it didn’t help. I figured I needed to be more consistent in putting lotion on my face, but it just got worse. So I did a little research and learned something. I found out there is a difference between your skin being dry and it being dehydrated. Dryness has to do with oils in your skin. It turns out that my skin was dehydrated. Lotions were not going to help it. What I needed to do was drink more water. When I started doing that it got better.

I tell you this because if you just try harder to love people and serve them, your soul likely is going to get dehydrated. It is going to start to shrivel. It will grow weary. You need to hydrate. Jesus said he is living water. We need to drink from him. We spiritually hydrate by drawing on God’s love for us. We need to go back to the truth we saw at the beginning of chapter 3, that God loves us with an unfathomable love. We need to drink continuously from his infinite fountain of love for us. We need to focus on, think about, and give thanks to God for his limitless, unconditional love that he is always pouring into us.

LOVE GOD FIRST

What makes it difficult to love people is…people. They often are hard to love because they are so committed to themselves. What can help us is putting our eyes on Jesus. Let’s start with loving him. As we love him we will want to serve him, and we can do that by serving others.

I watched part of a college football game yesterday. I know, you’re shocked. Michigan, in desperate need of a win, was playing Wisconsin. Michigan has a kid playing quarterback who is a terrific athlete and has a cannon arm. Unfortunately, yesterday his first pass was an ill-advised throw that was intercepted, leading to a touchdown for Wisconsin. Michigan got the ball back. The young quarterback ran a play where he saw his intended receiver wide open. At least that was what he thought. He totally locked onto the receiver and gunned a fastball at him. Sadly, he was so intently focused on the receiver that he completely missed the fact that there was a player from the other team standing between him and the receiver. So he fired that pass straight at the defender’s chest. The defender intercepted it, leading to another touchdown for Wisconsin, and the rout was on.

For that kid, that was a negative, but it actually can serve as a positive example for us. We can lock on to God as the intended receiver of our love, because he loves us so. We can be totally focused on him, and not focused on the fact that as we fire our love toward him there happens to be a human being standing in the way. That person in effect intercepts that love, and it brings him or her great joy.

In his book, *Authentic Power*, John Avant told of a time he was struggling through the Atlanta airport wrangling 3 big suitcases. Seeing his difficulty a Delta Airlines employee, a woman he learned was named Wolina, came to him and said, “Let me help you with those.” He’d never had an airline employee go out of his or her way like that to help. He told her that and said, “That was really nice of you.” She patted his arm and said, “When God has been as good to me as He has, I just have to pass his love on to others.” One of her fellow employees told John, “She’s always like that. She is so kind to everyone that they always want to know why, and she shares her faith with them.” That woman is drawing on God’s love, and it enables her to love others. He gives her power, real power.

Loving God and drinking from him is not only why we love, it is how we can love others regardless of what they are like. We love God, and when we love him we will love them. And when we love them we will exercise real, unstoppable power.