

“Praying for the Power to Love”

Introduction: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...” So promises Jesus as he instructs his followers to wait for the Spirit to come. And so prays the apostle Paul as the followers of Jesus, who have received the gift of the Spirit, wait for this power. Notice that Paul prayed for what Jesus had promised. Centering our prayers around the promises of God is good practice. I appreciate how John Stott explains it:

The indispensable prelude to all petition is the revelation of God’s will. . . That is why Bible reading and prayer should always go together. For it is in Scripture that God has disclosed his will, and it is in prayer that we ask him to do it. (*The Message of Ephesians*, p. 132).

But, if the power of the Holy Spirit is God’s will for us, what does such power look like? Paul mentions power three times in his short prayer:

¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches [the Father] may strengthen you with **power** through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have **power**, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. . .
²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his **power** that is at work within us. . .

On this Father’s Day, it seems appropriate to explore a prayer to, and the activity of, our heavenly Father. And what this glorious Father wants us to have more of, what the power of the Holy Spirit is all about, is not the power to impress, or the power to destroy, but the power to love.

I. For this reason I kneel before the Father...

A. We begin with a picture of Paul on his knees. There are a number of different postures for prayer that we see described in the biblical record. Standing was the typical posture for a good Jew in Paul’s day, but we also see people praying while sitting, walking, lying down, standing, and kneeling. If one were to pray while kneeling, it would indicate an exceptional sense of humility and earnestness. So, why did Paul assume this earnest posture?

B. Notice that he begins with the explanation, “For this reason...” Well, for what reason, we might ask? To see that, we need to back up into chapter 2 in which we find Paul explaining how, when dead in our sins, the God who is rich in mercy and love made us alive with Christ. Remarkably, as Paul goes on, we read that God did this not only for Jew, but also for Gentile, destroying, in the process, the dividing wall of hostility that had existed between these two groups, making them all members of God’s one household. Paul concludes in this way:

Consequently, you [Gentiles] are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. . . in which God lives by his Spirit. [Eph. 2:19-21]

C. Well, it is a beautiful picture of grace and unity, but certainly not an easy one to live out! And so, because of this amazing work of God, Paul prays for the love that it will take to live out this vision of different races and cultures working together inside the church, while bearing witness to this love outside the church. Let's notice a few particulars about this prayer.

II. I pray . . .

A. First, Paul prays that the Spirit might be powerfully at work in their inner being so that Christ would dwell in their hearts by faith. Our hearts are that part of our inner being that serve as the control room of our lives. It is the place where decisions and actions begin. Paul is praying not just that Jesus would be there, but that, through the Spirit, his love would be living and active there.

B. Helpful to know is that there are two possible choices for the word "dwell" that Paul uses. One simply means to inhabit a place, but not really live there, kind of like you might spend a few nights in a hotel. You're there only temporarily and so don't really spend much if any time getting to know your surroundings, except maybe where the extra towels are located! The other word for "dwell" means to settle in, to dwell in a house and make it a home, to get to know the neighborhood and put down roots. This is the word for dwell that Paul uses.

C. It ties in nicely with his two metaphors that follow, that his readers would be rooted and established in love. Established comes from the world of construction and pictures a strong foundation. Rooted comes from the world of agriculture and describes what is necessary for a tree or shrub to blossom.

In her book, *liturgy of the ordinary*, Tish Harrison Warren draws on this rooted image to describe God's love. She notes that when, at the baptism of Jesus, the Father declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," he does so before the Son has done anything impressive. Jesus hasn't spun a parable or preached a sermon. He hasn't healed anyone or resisted Satan in the wilderness. He hasn't yet been crucified or resurrected. Before he is sent out to do any of that, he receives a declaration of the Father's love. Harrison writes (p. 17):

Jesus is eternally beloved by the Father. His every activity unfurls from his identity as the Beloved. He loved others, healed others, preached, taught, rebuked, and redeemed not in order to gain the Father's approval but out of his rooted certainty in the Father's love.

Jesus took his strength from the Father's love. At that declaration, the Spirit came upon him and guided and formed and empowered him throughout his ministry, so much so that, as we heard him pray at the end of his life, he wanted his followers to experience the same love of the Father that he had known, because he knew that everything he would call them to do, from loving one another inside the church, to loving those outside the church, would flow from the love the Father has for us.

Illustration: This sense of dwelling, or being rooted, is kind of like the experience of virtually every married couple, at least sometime in their married life. One day you wake up and discover that you and your spouse have been living like roommates. Yes, you're married, yes you live in the same house and share the same bed, but for whatever reason, you have just been going through the motions. You have not been relating to one another like husband and wife.

D. Paul prays for his readers that through this strengthening power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would be, not their roommate but their spouse. As such, he goes on to pray, they would be able to grasp the incredible dimensions of divine love, how wide and long and high and deep it truly is. One writer describes the dimensions of such love in this way: the love of Christ is broad enough to encompass all mankind, long enough to last for eternity, deep enough to reach the most dysfunctional sinner, and high enough to bring him to heaven. While such love is beyond our understanding, and while we will spend a lifetime exploring its vast dimensions, as we take it in, and as it shapes and forms our lives, we begin to take on the fullness of God so that this statement that Paul makes later in his letter becomes more and more true about us (Eph. 5:1-2):

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

That is what the power of love, that comes from the Spirit, looks like.

I always get a kick out of that question you sometimes see printed on the back of those big tractor trailer trucks: "How am I driving?" And then they give you a number to call. Have any of you ever called? I think I'd be kind of afraid to!

But it does seem to me that it might be good, as followers of Jesus, for us to print up a bunch of t-shirts that ask the question: "How am I living?" and include the number of our church below it. How are we displaying power? Are we attracting others to God? Does the world see that we have been sent by God and that he loves them, too? Have we been using power to love, or to impress or even destroy? May we pray for more of what our heavenly Father desires to give us, the power of sacrificial, self-giving love that comes from his Spirit.