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DIFFERENT KINDS AND CONCEPTS OF STRENGTH AND POWER – THE ISSUES AND DANGERS INVOLVED

Introduction

Many who appear strong and powerful from the world's perspective can be very weak from the perspective of God's kingdom. They may be very weak in character, unable to take a stand for truth and principles. On the other hand, those who appear weak in the eyes of the world may be truly strong in the eyes of God. The Lord Jesus Christ at times appeared weak but He is truly strong. True strength is the strength and the power to live out the truth, to live out the will of God.

I will now consider with you the different kinds and concepts of strength and power and the issues and dangers involved.

Spiritual strength and power

We often associate strength and power with wealth, status, position of authority and capability. Indeed, this is so in the world. However, this is not true strength and power from the perspective of God's kingdom. This area is a snare for both non-believers and believers. The pursuit of worldly, temporal power has corrupted and destroyed the lives of many.

Some think that worldly strength and power is not worth pursuing, but spiritual power is. Many believers seek spiritual power because they think that it is something commendable and highly desirable. This may not be so as spiritual power can be of the evil one.

Spiritual power that is of the Lord is positive and builds up. It empowers us to serve the Lord and overcome the enemy. This is the kind of power manifested in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus and through the life and ministry of Paul and the other apostles.

Spiritual power can be of the evil one

The Scriptures reveals to us that the forces of darkness can exercise spiritual power and manifest it through human beings.

Let us look at two examples:

Pharaoh's magicians

Exodus 7:8-12

8 Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,

9 "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Work a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.' "

10 So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.

11 Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts.

12 For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.

Verses 8 to 10 show God's power manifested through Moses and Aaron, but verses 11 and 12 show the power of the evil one manifested through the magicians of Egypt. But note that the forces of darkness have limited power. We are told, in verse 12, that Aaron's staff swallowed up the staffs of the magicians. In Exodus 8:16-19, we see God, through Moses and Aaron, turning the dust of the earth to gnats throughout Egypt. Pharaoh's magicians tried to repeat the act with their secret arts, but they failed. They then acknowledged that what Moses and Aaron had done was a manifestation of God's power.

Exodus 8:16-19

16 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats through all the land of Egypt.' "

17 They did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt.

18 The magicians tried with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; so there were gnats on man and beast.

19 Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Simon, the magician

In Simon the magician, we see another example of the forces of darkness manifesting spiritual power through a human being.

Acts 8:9-11

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;

10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God."

11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

For a long time, Simon had been practising magic and manifesting the power of the forces of darkness. He claimed to be someone great. The people regarded him as "the Great Power of God". But he was not. It was the evil one working through Simon. Yet, the people were deceived into thinking that it was something positive, something to be admired. Mistaking it to be a manifestation of the power of God, they called him "the Great Power of God".

In many societies, manifestations of power by the forces of darkness are often regarded as manifestations of the power of God, causing either fear or worship.

The kingdom of God is spiritual and invisible, and there is manifestation of spiritual power in the kingdom of God. But not all manifestations of spiritual power are of the kingdom of God. There is also the kingdom of darkness, which is the domain of Satan.

Some shun the world's quest for power but think it is good to seek spiritual power. But they do not sufficiently recognise the dangers involved.

Deception in spiritual experiences

Many have been led astray by spiritual experiences and manifestations of spiritual power. Paul warns us that the evil one can disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). The forces of darkness can operate in such a way as to cause believers to mistake them to be the power of God.

An experience that seems to be spiritually uplifting may not be of God, even when it comes with thoughts and ideas that seem helpful for our growth. Often, when believers have a pleasant spiritual experience, especially when it is accompanied by a sense of peace and joy, they quickly conclude it is from God. This can be very dangerous as it may be the deception of the forces of darkness. If it is a deception and we welcome it, we can enter into a relationship with the forces of darkness. The deception can grow and become more and more complicated, and we may come under serious spiritual bondage.

The apostle John warns us not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirits, to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1). Paul warns us against being influenced by deceitful spirits, especially in the last days (1 Tim. 4:1).

Desiring a sense of power and authority

There is a proper place for us to seek for spiritual power. But we need to understand the issues and dangers involved and the proper way to seek for it.

Let us look again at Acts 8.

Acts 8:12-13

12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

When Simon heard Philip's preaching, he believed along with many others. As he continued on with Philip, he was drawn towards the more obvious manifestations of power – miracles, signs and wonders.

Some time later, Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem. They prayed and laid their hands on the believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This amazed Simon even more.

Acts 8:18-23

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

21 "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

23 "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

When Simon saw the Holy Spirit coming upon those whom the apostles laid hands on, he wanted to be able to do the same. His motive was clearly impure and his approach

improper. He desired a sense of power and authority. He wanted people to admire him; he wanted to be the centre of attention.

When we read this passage, we may think it is not applicable to us. However, we need to pause and reflect over the matter more carefully.

Many believers have a desire for spiritual power and authority, thinking, "If I can have this kind of power, this kind of authority, then I can really serve God and be effective and powerful. I can do great things for the glory of God and for the advancement of His kingdom." Believers with such longings may not realise something could be amiss in their heart.

Yes, it is positive to have the desire to serve God. But is there also a desire to have a sense of power and authority so people can look up to us or admire us?

Even though Simon professed faith in the gospel and in the Lord Jesus Christ, the impure desire in his heart remained. Peter, in verse 22, told Simon to repent of his wickedness.

Peter said, "...you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity". "The bondage of iniquity" could refer to Simon's involvement with magic or the forces of darkness working in his life in times past, and he was still in bondage to the forces of darkness. It could also refer to the wrongful desires in his heart for attention, the desire to be great and to be recognised as such. Although he professed faith in Christ, he was still in bondage because he had impure desires and longings, which were complicated by his past association with the forces of darkness.

Proper motives for wanting spiritual strength

Love for God and desire to live out the truth

We should long to be empowered by the Lord so we can be truly strong. But it is important to examine our hearts before the Lord. The longing must be motivated by love for the Lord, love for the truth and a desire to live out the truth and the perfect will of God. That must be the overriding motivation for wanting to experience the power of God. Our whole approach must be grounded in truth and sound knowledge.

Developing good character and attitudes

The longing to be truly strong must go together with the nurturing of a good character and positive attitudes; otherwise a longing for power, even for God's power, can be unwholesome, even dangerous. Good attitudes and character must take precedence over acquiring power. If there is improper motive, a desire for recognition, pride in our hearts, we give grounds for the evil one to work in us.

Recognising our weakness and need of God

This desire to be truly strong must come about because we recognise that we are weak in ourselves and that we are unable to live out the truth unless empowered by the Lord. We want to be strengthened in the Lord because we want to be true to Him.

Longing for the fulfilment of God's purposes

God empowers us for a purpose. It is not so that we can have a sense of power or authority. Neither is it for self-indulgence nor for self-exaltation. It is for the fulfilment of His purposes. A proper longing to experience true spiritual power of the Lord must go together with a longing that God's purposes be fulfilled.

Wrong motives together with wrong approaches and doctrines

If our desire to be empowered or to experience spiritual power is tainted with impure desires and with wrong motives, it does not just hinder our experience of true power. What is more serious is that it also renders us vulnerable to experiencing the power of the evil one. This can lead to serious bondage and complications, especially *if* the wrong motives in our hearts are also coupled with the *wrong approach, wrong understanding and wrong doctrines*. I will consider with you three aggravating scenarios.

"Emptying" of oneself

A person may be earnestly seeking to be empowered by the Lord, but he has impure motives. The gravity of the situation is aggravated when he seeks this power by "emptying himself". The idea is that he needs to "empty" himself so that the Holy Spirit can come in and fill him. This is not an uncommon practice. It may be practised in a group or individually. The person seeks to "empty" himself by not holding onto anything; his mind is blank, not thinking about anything. He just cries out to the Holy Spirit to come in and take control of his life. He opens himself up for an external spirit being to come into him and take over his life and his faculties or to possess him. Such an approach renders him very vulnerable to evil spirits coming into him to possess him. The Holy Spirit does not want to come into our lives to take control of us and our faculties in this way.

Strong or overwhelming emotions that hinder clear thinking, self-control and proper exercise of faculties

The gravity of the situation is further aggravated by an atmosphere that encourages the expressions of strong, overwhelming emotions. They play loud music, raise their voices and cry aloud. This can take place individually or in a group setting. Some associate emotionalism with being earnest and true spiritual experience of God. They think to be spiritual, they need to have strong emotions of deep love and longing for God.

A person in such a situation may experience something in the spiritual realm and he may believe that he is experiencing the Spirit of God and becoming more spiritual. He may think that the Spirit of God is encouraging him to move further in that direction.

We need to distinguish between feeling emotional and having a deep love and longing for God. There is a place for emotions. A proper experience of emotions will not be at the expense of clear thinking, self-control and proper exercise of our faculties. God wants us to exercise self-control and proper exercise of our faculties. The fruit of the Spirit includes self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Therefore, if our experience is of the Holy Spirit, we should have better exercise of our faculties, rather than not being able to do so.

The forces of darkness, on the other hand, want to take over and dominate our lives. They seek to hinder the proper exercise of our faculties so we will become easy prey.

The way the forces of darkness work is different from the way the Holy Spirit works. The forces of darkness want to control us and force us to do their bidding. The Holy Spirit wants us to actively choose to cooperate with Him. This is a very important principle to take note.

The Lord Jesus tells us to love the Lord our God with all our mind. Paul stresses the importance of the renewed mind in Romans 12:1-2. God wants to renew our mind. We are to love Him with all our heart as well as with all our mind – a mind that has been transformed. He wants us to cooperate with Him with as clear a mind as possible. And the Spirit of God within us helps us to think clearly along biblical principles.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:32 that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets”. The principle is that when the Spirit of God is working within us, our spirit is still subject to us. We can control our spirit. The Spirit of God does not come in and take control of our spirit so that we are no longer able to exercise our spirit properly.

We must, at all times, maintain and exercise control over our faculties by actively choosing to cooperate with what the Spirit of God is seeking to do within us and to lead us in the direction of truth.

Speaking in tongues wrongly linked to being filled with the Spirit

A notion held by some Christians is that being filled with the Holy Spirit must be evidenced by speaking in tongues – if you are truly filled with the Holy Spirit, then you must speak in tongues; speaking in tongues is associated with being filled with the Holy Spirit.

This wrong notion of linking speaking in tongues with being filled with the Holy Spirit leads to an intense desire by believers to be able to speak in tongues. And they try all sorts of ways to achieve that. This can provide an environment for counterfeits to be supplied by

the forces of darkness. And believers may gladly receive such counterfeits without realising they are not of God. When this takes place, the believer enters into a relationship with the evil spirit who is the source of the counterfeit and comes under its influence and spiritual bondage.

Important to exercise care

We need to learn the principles well so we can recognise when things are not going on well. In our desire to serve the Lord and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, we must bear in mind the proper approach and the dangers involved. If we should have a spiritual experience, even though it may seem to be of God, we should still be careful. We should discuss it with those who can help us be clearer. We must not assume it is from God and quickly receive it. If we do so, we can end up in spiritual bondage if it is actually from the forces of darkness. It is helpful to take a stand in our hearts to receive only what is of God and reject all that is of the evil one.

When the forces of darkness are actively at work in our lives, it can be difficult to seek help because the forces of darkness may try to hinder us from doing so. For example, they may impress upon us that we are specially called of the Lord, that God is bringing us through a special experience, that we must trust God and not depend on man because it is something special between us and God. If we believe them, we will not be able to receive help when we need it most.

In healthy church life, God provides us brethren who can help us. God does not want us to isolate ourselves and live independently. He wants us to be on the alert, especially when we are going through unusual spiritual experiences. It is important to seek clarification from more mature Christians so we will not get into serious spiritual difficulties.

True strength and power in God's kingdom

True strength and power in God's kingdom can include the genuine experience of manifestations of God's power.

However, there is a tendency, even among believers, to be impressed by and drawn towards the more obvious and spectacular manifestations of power, like miracles, healings and casting out demons.

On the other hand, there are those who are sceptical of such manifestations of power. They think that God no longer performs such manifestations, like miracles and healings, through people, and that such gifts have ceased after the New Testament times. To them, such manifestations today must be of the evil one.

I have read some writings of those who hold this view, but I have not come across convincing biblical support for such a position. This position is also not in line with spiritual reality.

It is a grave error to attribute what is of the Lord to the evil one. If it is a genuine expression of the power of God, and we categorically state that it is of the evil one, we can incur the wrath of God. If we are not sure whether it is of God or of the evil one, we should not state categorically either way. In this area, as in all others, we need to adopt a wholesome, balanced, biblical approach.

God is sovereign. He has the prerogative to work as He sees fit, according to His perfect wisdom. He can still perform miracles and healing through people. He is the almighty God, and He can grant such spiritual gifts to His children. Such gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12-14. It is the Spirit of God who distributes as He sees fit. We should not say that God no longer performs such manifestations of power through people, or that there can be no genuine exercise of such gifts after the New Testament times without clear scriptural basis for taking such a position.

There is a distinction between the exercise of a gift and a manifestation of power in this area. A person may manifest the power of God without having the spiritual gift in that area. God can work a miracle through a person, but it does not mean that he has the spiritual gift of miracle.

God may manifest His power through the spiritually weak

God does not perform miracles only through those who are truly spiritually strong. He can do so even through those who are spiritually weak.

Consider the Corinthian Christians. As far as spiritual gifts are concerned, they were not deficient (1 Cor. 1:7). But Paul has this to say about them:

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

Paul could not speak to them as to spiritual men for they were men of flesh, infants in Christ. He could only give them milk to drink because they were not able to receive solid food. They were not spiritual, but carnal. Yet, they exercised various spiritual gifts, including tongues, miracles and healing, as listed in 1 Corinthians 12-14. They tended to

be preoccupied with these things, especially tongues. That was why Paul paid much attention to this issue in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Those spiritually strong may not manifest God's power in spectacular forms

In contrast to the Corinthian Christians, the Scriptures highlights a man who was truly strong, yet performed no signs. And this was during the New Testament period when signs and wonders were manifested in the ministry of those who served the Lord effectively.

Let us look at three verses that describe this man, John the Baptist:

Luke 1:15

"For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

Luke 1:80

And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

John 10:41

Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true."

Although strong in spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit even while yet in his mother's womb, John the Baptist performed no sign. This shows us that God may not perform works of miracles or healing through one who is truly strong.

We need to ask ourselves: Are we concentrating on the right things? Do we concentrate on external manifestations or on truth, sound knowledge, good character, oneness with God in heart and direction? These are the critical things.

It is when we concentrate on the right things that we are ready to ask God to fill us with His Holy Spirit. We want to be faithful to God and we recognise we are weak in ourselves and need to be empowered by the Spirit of God. And from time to time, it is helpful to ask the Lord to fill us afresh with the Holy Spirit.

Empowering on specific occasions

Even when we are filled with the Spirit, it is proper for us to ask the Lord to specially empower us for occasions that are especially demanding or more significant.

Consider an illustration in Acts 4:8. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and he was ministering with power (Acts 2 and 3). Signs and miracles were being performed through him and he was preaching the gospel with power. He was brought before the Council, the Jewish Supreme Court or the Sanhedrin, and they questioned him.

Acts 4:7-8

7 When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?"

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people,

Peter was already filled with the Spirit. But here we are told Peter, "filled with the Holy Spirit" (margin of NASB: or "having just been filled"), addressed the rulers and elders. He was filled afresh. He was specially empowered to face this situation. It was important that he should give a bold, effective and accurate testimony before the Council, which comprised the secular and religious leaders of Israel.

Acts 4:13

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

Peter was an uneducated and untrained fisherman. But, empowered by the Lord, he was able to bring forth an unusually effective testimony before the Council comprising learned men.

Reflections on Matthew 7:22-23

This is a helpful passage to reflect upon in relation to the issues we have been considering. In Matthew 7:22-23, towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus says:

Matthew 7:22-23

22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'

23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

The Lord Jesus says many will say to Him on Judgement Day that they prophesied, cast out demons and performed many miracles in His name. But the Lord Jesus will say to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

It is not very clear what categories of people the Lord Jesus is referring to. There are two possibilities.

1. These people may be true believers at one point in time. They addressed Jesus as Lord, they prophesied and cast out demons in His name. But they have since degenerated. Even then, they continued exercising these spiritual gifts. However, what they were doing was no longer meaningful. The Lord will reject not only their works and service, but also the people themselves. It is not clear from this passage whether the spiritual gifts they were subsequently exercising were of the Lord or were counterfeits from the evil one.

2. These people were not true believers, but thought they were. They addressed Jesus as Lord and performed miracles and cast out demons in His name. In reality, the spiritual gifts were counterfeits of the evil one, and so they and their works will be rejected by the Lord.

In the preceding verses, the Lord Jesus warns us about false prophets.

Matthew 7:15

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

The Lord Jesus says we will know them by their fruits. He then speaks about the bad tree producing bad fruit and the good tree producing good fruit (vs. 16-20), and warns that not everyone who calls Him, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 21). In this context, He says, “Many will say to Me on that day...” So it is possible that this is a reference to those who are not true believers but are false prophets.

Let us take note of a few points arising from this passage:

a. Quality of life and character determines true value of our service

The key issue is this: The true nature of our lives and character and the inward realities determine the quality of our works and service. The quality of our works and service is not determined by the outward manifestations. Performing miracles, casting out demons, prophesying in the name of the Lord may appear impressive, but they may not be of value in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord Jesus says, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” The practice of lawlessness indicates something is amiss in the heart. When the heart is not right, what comes forth will not be good fruit. It will not be pleasing to the Lord.

b. We may be mistaken we are serving the Lord when we are not

The passage suggests that these people thought they were serving the Lord. It does not mean that if we think we are serving the Lord, we are necessarily truly serving Him, and that what we do will be acceptable to Him.

Some may be deceivers trying to take advantage of others by claiming they are of the Lord while others may themselves be deceived, thinking that they are serving the Lord, when in reality, they are being used by the evil one.

This principle can also apply to believers. We may think we are serving the Lord when, in fact, the evil one is manipulating and using our lives. If our lives are not right, we may actually be doing negative, destructive things in the name of the Lord.

c. What seem right may actually be negative

It is possible to say and to do things that seem right and positive, but in reality, are negative. Look at Matthew 7:22. They called the Lord Jesus, "Lord"; they prophesied, cast out demons and performed many miracles in His name. The outward description sounds positive. But the reality is actually negative because there wasn't the corresponding positive inward reality. It is the inward reality that determines the true nature, quality and meaning of our words and actions.

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