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MESSAGE 5

STRENGTH AND POWER: CONCEPTS, ISSUES AND DANGERS

In this message, I wish to consider with you the different kinds and concepts of strength and power and the issues and dangers involved.

Worldly perspective vs God's perspective of strength and power

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

Some believers, on the other hand, think that worldly power is not worth pursuing, but spiritual power is. They seek spiritual power, thinking it is something commendable and highly desirable.

Indeed, spiritual power that is of the Lord is worth pursuing. It is positive and it 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. But not all spiritual power is of this kind. It is therefore important, as we seek to be strong in the Lord, that we have a clear understanding of the issues and dangers involved, so that we are not unduly drawn towards manifestations of spiritual power or seeking for spiritual experiences.

Spiritual power can be of the evil one

Though the kingdom of God is spiritual and invisible, there can be manifestations of spiritual power. But not all manifestations of spiritual power are of God. There are also the kingdom of darkness, the domain of Satan, and the manifestations of spiritual power that are 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. 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. We see a further indication of their limited power in verses 16-19.

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.

Here, 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 failed. They then acknowledged that what Moses and Aaron had done was a manifestation of God's power.

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 and the people regarded him as "the Great Power of God". But he was not. What had transpired was the evil one working through him. 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 or both.

It is important for believers to take note that not all manifestations of spiritual power and not all spiritual experiences are of God. It is very helpful to have some understanding of this subject and learn how to safeguard ourselves from being deceived by the evil one.

Deception in spiritual experiences

The forces of darkness can operate in a way that causes believers to mistake manifestations of spiritual power that come from them to be manifestations of God's power. Many have indeed been led astray by spiritual experiences and manifestations of spiritual power that are not from God. In 2 Corinthians 11:14, Paul warns us that the evil one can disguise himself as an angel of light.

Often, when believers have a pleasant spiritual experience, especially when accompanied by a sense of peace and joy, they quickly conclude that it is from God. Concluding quickly in this way can be very dangerous. We must not assume that every experience that seems spiritually uplifting and helpful for our growth comes from God. It could be a deception of the evil one and if we welcome it, we can enter into a relationship with the forces of darkness. This can allow the deception to grow and become more and more serious, and we may come under deep 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 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. He actually offered the apostles money so that they would bestow on him such power and authority!

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 hearts.

Yes, it is commendable to have the desire to serve God. But is there also a desire to have power and authority so people will 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" (v. 23). "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 his still being 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 of his impure desires and longings, which were complicated by his past association with the forces of darkness.

Proper motives for desiring spiritual strength

We should long to be empowered by the Lord so we can be truly strong. But it is important to examine our motives. Proper motives would include:

1. Love for God and desire to live out the truth

The longing for spiritual strength 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. This must be the overriding motivation for desiring to experience the power of God.

2. Longing for the fulfilment of God's purposes

God empowers us for a purpose. He does not empower us so we can enjoy a sense of power or authority. He does not empower us for our self-indulgence and self-exaltation. He does so for the fulfilment of His purposes. Thus, a longing to experience spiritual power of the Lord must go together with a longing that God's purposes be fulfilled.

3. A desire to develop good character and attitudes

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

4. Recognising our weakness and need of God

The desire to be truly strong must also come from the recognition that we are weak in ourselves and that we are unable to live out the truth on our own. We know that unless we are empowered by the Lord, we will surely fail. So we seek His strengthening that we can be true to Him.

Wrong motives, wrong approaches, wrong understanding

If our desire to experience spiritual power is tainted with impure desires and with wrong motives, we will be hindered in our experience of true power. More serious than that, we will become vulnerable to the evil one. This can lead to serious bondage and complications, especially if the wrong motives in our hearts are coupled with wrong approaches and wrong understanding. I will consider with you three aggravating scenarios.

Scenario#1 – “Emptying” of oneself

Some have the idea that for the Holy Spirit to come in and fill their hearts, they need to “empty” themselves. This idea is not uncommon. It may be practised in a group or individually. The person seeks to “empty” himself by not holding onto anything. He blanks his mind, not thinking about anything. He cries out to the Holy Spirit to come in and take control of his life. In doing so, he opens himself up to an external spirit to come into him and take over his life and his faculties. Such an approach renders him very vulnerable to evil spirits coming into him and possessing him. This approach is wrong because the Holy Spirit does not want to come into our lives to take control of us and our faculties in this way. On the other hand, the evil spirits are eager to come into us and take control of our lives and our faculties.

Senario#2 – Strong or overwhelming emotions that hinder clear thinking, self-control and proper exercise of faculties

An atmosphere that encourages the expressions of strong, overwhelming emotions can aggravate the situation. In such an atmosphere, loud music may be played, voices raised and people may cry loudly. Again, this can take place individually or in a group setting.

Some associate emotionalism with spiritual earnestness and having a genuine experience of God. They think to be spiritual, they need to experience strong emotions of deep love and longing for God and manifest it outwardly. Although our relationship with God does involve our emotions, such an emotional spiritual experience may be the work of the evil one. The person may mistakenly 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. But a proper experience of emotions in the Lord 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 to have proper exercise of our faculties at all times. The fruit of the Spirit includes self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Therefore, if our experience is truly of the Holy Spirit, we should be able to exercise our faculties more efficiently rather than less efficiently or not being able to exercise them at all.

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 to make us 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 of.

The Lord Jesus tells us to love the Lord our God with all our mind (Matt. 22:37). 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 clarity in our minds. And the Spirit of God within us seeks to help 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 such 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 the Spirit of God in what He is seeking to do within us and through us.

Scenario#3 – Linking speaking in tongues with 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. They say that if you are truly filled with the Holy Spirit, then you must speak in tongues. This is not the teaching of the Scriptures.

Linking speaking in tongues with being filled with the Holy Spirit may lead to an intense desire by believers to be able to speak in tongues. Such believers may try all sorts of ways to achieve that. This can provide an environment for the forces of darkness to introduce counterfeits. 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 bondage.

Importance of exercising care and being open to help from the brethren

In seeking to become truly strong, we need to understand the spiritual principles involved and be able to discern when things are not going on well. In our desire to serve the Lord and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, we ought to be mindful of the dangers involved and the proper approach to take. If we do have a spiritual experience, even though it may seem to be of God, we should still be careful. We must not assume it is from God and quickly receive it. If we do so, and if it is actually from the forces of darkness, we can end up in spiritual bondage. So we need to be alert, especially when we have unusual spiritual experiences. 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 our experience is something special between us and God. If we believe them, we will not be open to receive help when we need it most.

But 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 help one another and watch out for one another. So, when we have unusual spiritual experiences, it is important that we seek clarification from more mature Christians to avoid getting into serious spiritual difficulties.

True strength and manifestations of God's power

While 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 of demons, 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.

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

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 make a categorical statement either way. In this area, as in all others, we need to adopt a wholesome, balanced, and 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, unless we have 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 effecting miracles.

Manifestation of God's power does not imply spiritual health and maturity

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 Christians in Corinth. 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. It is important to have a wholesome understanding of the issues involved and Paul sought to help them in that direction.

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

In contrast to the Christians in Corinth, 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 obvious 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, which 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 seek to be faithful to God, but recognise we are weak in ourselves and need to be empowered by the Spirit of God. So we ask God to fill us with His Spirit. And from time to time, it is helpful to ask God 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. On one occasion, 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 and 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.

Will our service and manifestation of power be acceptable to God?

There 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.

- 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. Not only will the Lord reject their works and service, He will also reject them. 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.
- 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 Matthew 7:22-23 is a reference not to true believers, but to false prophets.

Let us take note of three points arising from this passage:

1. What seems right may actually be negative

It is possible to say and do things that seem right and positive, but in reality, are negative. In Matthew 7:22, these people addressed the Lord Jesus as "Lord"; they prophesied, cast out demons and performed many miracles in His name. Outwardly, what they did seemed positive. But in reality, they were not because there wasn't the corresponding positive inward reality.

2. We may think we are serving the Lord when we are not

The passage suggests that these people thought they were serving the Lord. The fact that they thought they were serving the Lord does not mean they were truly serving Him, or that what they did would be acceptable to Him.

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

This can also be true of 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.

3. Quality of life and character determines the true value of our service

The quality of our works and service is not determined by their outward manifestations. Performing miracles, casting out demons, prophesying in the name of the Lord may appear impressive, but they will not be of value in the eyes of the Lord if our hearts are not right. The Lord Jesus says: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (v. 23). 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. It is the true nature of our lives and character and the inward realities that determine the quality of our works and service.

Concluding remarks

If we want to fulfil the will of God and live a fruitful and overcoming life, we need to experience the power of God at work in and through our lives. Such a life must be grounded in the positive qualities of the inner man, knowledge of the truth and a close walk with God. Good character and positive qualities in the heart of the believer, together with knowledge of the truth and a good relationship with God, enable the believer to bear good fruit continually – as he walks in fellowship with God, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This, indeed, is the essence of the Lord's teaching in John 15:5: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing".

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Is it desirable for Christians to seek for spiritual power? Why or why not?
2. Spiritual power may be of the evil one. What are some biblical examples of the forces of darkness manifesting spiritual power through human beings?
3. Share your understanding of the warnings in 2 Corinthians 11:14, 1 Timothy 4:1 and 1 John 4:1 against being deceived by the forces of darkness. How can we guard ourselves from being deceived?
4. What would be proper motives for desiring spiritual strength and experiences of spiritual power?
5. What is your understanding of the dangers concerning the presence of wrong motives, wrong approaches and wrong understanding in the pursuit of spiritual strength and experiences of spiritual power?

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