

Series: 1 Corinthians

Title: Not in Word But in Power

Text: 1 Cor 4: 18-21

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1 Corinthians 4: 18: Now some are puffed up, as though I would not come to you.

False preachers in Corinth were full of themselves—“puffed up”—and spreading false rumors to undermine Paul’s authority. They were saying that Paul would not be faithful to visit Corinth. Paul said,

1 Corinthians 4: 19: But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will,...

Paul acknowledged God’s will to be above and in control of his own will. This is how we ought to answer men, too. “Whereas ye know not what *shall be* on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye *ought* to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” (Jam 4: 14-15) Paul said

1 Corinthians 4: 19: But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, if I do come, I will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power.

Paul was not interested in their oratory, their ability to persuade men, their endless sermons on ‘how to and how not to’. Paul desired to know by what power they preached. Was God working in them in power? Were they depending upon the power of God in their preaching? Was the power of the Holy Spirit giving life to dead sinners, effectually converting sinners to rest in Christ and follow him? He said,

1 Corinthians 4: 20: For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.

The kingdom of God is a spiritual, eternal kingdom, not of this world, but of God. Christ said that! (Jn 18: 36) The King of God’s kingdom is the triune God in Christ Jesus, the GodMan. Believers, born of God, are the subjects of Christ our King, the citizens of this kingdom. Our purpose in the kingdom of God is to glorify our King by worshipping him, by spreading his gospel, by waiting on him to work in power in his people. “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.” (Mt 6: 13)

But the kingdom of God is not in word. It is not in learning a form of doctrine nor in memorizing creeds or statements of faith.

The kingdom of God is not in outward forms of duty such as abstaining from or eating certain meat and drink. It is not in wearing a certain uniform nor in a particular denomination of men.

The kingdom of God is not in a show of religious devotion. It is not in baptism or observing the Lord’s Table. It is not in church attendance to be seen of men nor in praying to be seen of men nor in acting out vain traditions to be seen of men. Many there be “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.” (2 Tim 3: 5)

The kingdom of God is in power. It is in the power of God. God is power. That is the very definition of who God is. There is none as powerful as God. God does as he will in heaven and upon the earth and none can stop him or even question him. (Dan 4: 35)

When God our Father chose whom he would in Christ in eternity, God did so in power. It is his power to do with his own what he will.

Romans 9: 17: For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. 18: Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will *have mercy*, and whom he will he hardeneth. 19: Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? 20: Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed *it*, Why hast thou made me thus? 21: Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? 22: *What* if God, willing to shew *his* wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: 23: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, 24: Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

When God created the heaven and the earth, he did so in power. God rules all providence—the elements, the hearts of men, kingdoms in the earth—in power.

When our Redeemer took flesh and dwelt among us, he did so in power. When Christ fulfilled the law and the prophets, he did it in power. Even when he allowed men to take him captive, he gave them power so that they

fulfilled his will. When Christ redeemed his elect, he did so in power. When he arose, the GodMan, arose with absolute sovereign power over all. He said, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Mt 28: 18)

When Christ sends his gospel he sends it in power. When the Holy Spirit quickens dead sinners, he quickens in power. When he converts, he converts in power. “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.” (Jn 1: 12) God “hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.” (Jn 17: 2) When he works in his people that which is well-pleasing in his sight, he does so in power. “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power...” (Ps 110: 3) He keeps his people by the power of God. (1 Pet 1: 5)

Can we know whether a work is merely the power of men or the power of God? Paul said, “When I come I will know.” Christ our sovereign King said that we indeed can know false prophets from true and it has to do with this power.

Matthew 7: 15: Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing [outwardly], but inwardly they are ravening wolves. 16: Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? 17: Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. 18: A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. 19: Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 20: Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

All fruits of righteousness are only by the power of Christ. We are “filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.” (Php 1: 11) Only Christ makes the tree good—only the power of Christ can make his preacher. Only Christ makes the tree bring forth good fruit—only Christ gives power so that his preacher is used to bring forth true converts and only his people bring forth fruit by Christ’s power. So Christ said, “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 & 2, Paul declared the power of God worked in their midst. In these chapters we will see three things. One, we will see that the gospel is the power of God. Two, we will see that power Christ works in his preachers. Three, we will see the power Christ works in his people.

As we see these three points keep this one proposition in mind: the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.

THE GOSPEL IS THE POWER OF GOD

Paul said, “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance;...” (1 Thess 1: 4-5)

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Paul told the Romans, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” (Rom 1: 16-17)

“Our gospel” is not that other gospel, which is not another. (Gal 1: 6-7) It is not that false gospel of the weak, powerless Jesus which they say only made salvation possible but depends on the sinner to make his work effectual. There is no righteousness revealed in a Jesus who died for everyone but redeemed no one. There is no righteousness revealed in that impotent Jesus who depends upon the sinner to make his work effectual. There is no righteousness revealed in a God who they say justified all men on the cross but then they say he pours out justice a second time on all who will not believe on him. There is no righteousness revealed in that idol Jesus who supposedly died for all men, even those who were already in hell when he died.

“Our gospel” is the good news of the all-powerful Lord Jesus who accomplished the redemption of every chosen child of God.

“Our gospel” is the good news that Christ obeyed God our Father as the Representative Head and Substitute of his people.

“Our gospel” is the good news that Christ was made sin for us, Christ was made a curse for us, and Christ satisfied justice for us.

“Our gospel” is the good news that Christ himself is the Righteousness of God, the only righteousness of all who are brought to faith in him.

Paul said, “Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance;...” By the power of God, at the time appointed by God, the gospel comes to every redeemed child in word through the preaching of the gospel, but it comes not in word only, but in the irresistible grace and power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit creates life in these bodies of death where there was only spiritual death. He gives ears to hear and a heart to believe where there was only a heart of enmity against God.

The Holy Spirit gives us “much assurance.” It means he fully persuades us, giving us the full assurance of understanding.

Christ sends us this Comforter, the Holy Spirit of God. And the first thing the Holy Spirit does to comfort his child is to convince us of sin, persuading his child that we are dead, undone, unrighteous, unholy sinners because we believe not on Christ. The Holy Spirit convinces us of righteousness revealing in our hearts that Christ is our Righteousness, proven by the fact that God raised him to his own right hand and Christ sat down because the work is finished! The Holy Spirit convinces his child of judgment because Christ has forever settled judgment on our behalf so that the accuser of the brethren has no more ammunition against us. (Jn 16: 7-11)

Brethren, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for therein is the righteousness of God revealed by the Holy Spirit in much assurance from faith to faith. Paul says by this power, by God making us rest entirely in Christ alone, God makes us to know our election of God.

THE POWER OF GOD WORKED IN HIS PREACHER

In order to support the truth that it was the power of God working in them and not Paul’s power, Paul said, “...as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.” (1 Thess 1: 5) Then, in chapter 2, Paul declares some things which God works in his preacher in power.

One, God’s preachers are given power to preach the truth of Christ, even in the face of strong opposition. Paul said, “For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain. But even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention.” (1 Thess 2: 1-2) Christ said, “You will know them by their fruits.” If a preacher holds back the truth because he is afraid of offending men, afraid of suffering, afraid of being shamefully entreated by sinners then he is not preaching by the power of God. But Paul was preaching by the power of God and he said, “even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated,...we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention.” Paul said to those at Corinth, I “will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.”

Two, by God’s power, there is no deceitful, selfish motive in God’s true preacher, only a desire to please God rather than men. Paul said, “For our exhortation was not of deceit” [we used no deception] “nor of uncleanness” [we were not preaching with impure motives] “nor in guile:” [we were not crafting the word to suit some malicious gain.] “But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts.” (1 Thess 2: 3-4) The power of God makes his preacher honest with sinners because God’s preacher desires to please God rather than men.

Three, by the power of God, God’s true preacher does not flatter sinners. Paul said, “For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know,...” (1 Thess 2: 5) False preachers flatter sinners by turning regeneration, righteousness, sanctification, preservation or some aspect of salvation over to the will of the sinner. It flatters the sinner to be told that he has power in himself to work any point in his salvation. But by the power of God, faithful preachers declare that man’s very best righteousnesses are filthy rags before God. (Is 64: 6) There is nothing flattering in the truth of our total depravity.

Four, false preachers seek filthy, selfish gain and glory for self. But God’s preacher is given power to glorify God by depending on God to provide. Paul “...nor a cloke of covetousness; God *is* witness: Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor *yet* of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ.” (1 Thess 2: 5-6) By God’s power, God’s preacher is not wearing a disguise when underneath his heart is covetous for the riches of sinners. God’s power will not let God’s preacher seek to enrich himself on the backs of sinners. But rather, by the power of God, God’s preacher desires to see bankrupt sinners enriched by the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Five, God’s power gives his preacher a loving, meek spirit. In our text in Corinthians, after speaking of God’s power, Paul asked “What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and *in* the spirit of meekness?” (1 Cor 4: 21) False preachers think it shows the power of God for the preacher to use a rod to force sinners to cut out this and cut out that. Which they do so they can glory in your flesh in what they made you perform. (Gal 6: 13) But the power of God, makes God’s preacher depend upon God’s power so that they deal with sinners in a meek and loving spirit. Paul said, “But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God. Ye *are* witnesses, and God *also*, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father *doth* his children, That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.” (1 Thess 2: 7-12)

Six, by the power of God, when sinners are converted under their preaching, God's preacher gives all the glory to God, thanking God for his power working in sinners. Paul said, "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received *it not as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." (1Th 2:13)

Brethren, God's preachers have ceased using gimmicks and other means which we see so often used in our day. Why? When a man has experienced the power of God, through the power of the gospel then that man will depend upon the power of God through the power of the gospel to work in the hearts of others rather than abusing his authority by an unjust use of the rod of his own power.

THE POWER OF GOD WORKED IN HIS PEOPLE

Now, let's go back to the 1st chapter of 1st Thessalonians to see the fruit produced by the power of God in the heart of his people. This is the power Paul was looking for when he visited Corinth.

One, the power of God makes a believer follow the Lord, as well as follow God's preacher and his brethren. Paul said, "And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia." (1 Thess 1: 6-7) Believers are sinners still. But in the general tenor of their lives, believers follow Christ. We follow Christ's teaching and Christ's example. We follow by faith, constrained by love, motivated by gratitude. And by the same power of God, Christ makes his child follow the preacher and the people that Christ has provided to preach the gospel to him. The Lord's power makes us love the feet of them that brought these glad tidings of Christ to us.

When the Lord called me by his grace, the Lord also gave me a heart to submit and follow my pastor. My pastor was easy to follow because the Lord made him faithful to the Lord and his people. He was not out to use me and abuse me like false preachers. The power of God made him faithful to Christ, with a loving spirit, so that he was easy for me to follow. I pray God make me such a pastor.

Two, by the power of God, Christ makes his child committed to spreading the gospel in all the world. Paul said, "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;...For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing." (1 Thess 1: 3, 8) Preaching and spreading the gospel is constant, hard work, which requires much patience. God's preacher is commanded to be ready to preach "in season and out season." (2 Ti 4: 2) Likewise, all his people are commanded to "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." (Mt 6: 33) Therefore, the power of God makes the spreading of this gospel supersede all else in our lives. Only the power of God makes it a work of faith; only his power makes it a labor of love; only his power gives patience of hope and it is all in our Lord Jesus Christ and in the sight of God our Father. God make us like those who "addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints." (1 Cor 16: 15)

Three, the power of God turns his child in repentance and faith from our idols to Christ. Paul said, "For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;" (1 Thess 1: 9) Everything that comes between a sinner and Christ is an idol. The sinner's idol is self and all extensions of self, such as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters and all our stuff! Idolatry is serving self rather than the true and living God. True repentance, which God gives in power, is renouncing our former vain religion as worthless, renouncing our will, our works, and the cares of this world for Christ and his kingdom and his righteousness! Only the power of God turns his child from idols to serve the true and living God.

Lastly, as we do all these things, the power of God makes us constantly look for Christ's return. Paul said, "And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, *even* Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." (1 Thess 1: 10)

Brethren, these are all fruits of the power of God which Christ works in his preacher and his people through the power of the gospel of Christ our Righteousness—our triumphant King and Savior! This is why Paul said "(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;" (2 Cor 10: 4-5)

This obedience is not in word only but in the power of Christ our God and our King. It is what Paul meant when he said to those in Corinth, "I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power."

Amen!