

**Questions of the Cross:
POWER**

John 19:1-16

What sort of power is found in the cross?

A sermon preached by
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I've explained before that I'm from LA—Lower Arkansas. Where I come from, there are lots of trees, mostly pine trees, and there are lots of people who work out in the woods, cutting down trees for the paper and lumber mills. One of these men, Cletus, had worked for years with a crosscut saw powered by human muscle. One day, Cletus broke his saw and needed a new one. He had heard of these new inventions called chain saws, and he determined that he was going to get one. So he went in to the co-op and asked the salesman if they had any chain saws. The salesman said, "We sure do! With these new chain saws, you will increase your production by two or three times. They're amazing!"

So Cletus bought himself a chain saw. But about four days later, he was back at the co-op. He told the salesman, "There must be something wrong with this chain saw. The first day I did pretty good, but the second day it was a struggle to get as many trees cut as I normally do. The third day, by lunchtime I was plumb wore out."

The salesman said, "That's unusual. Let me take a look at your chain saw." He took the saw, pulled the cord, and started it up. When the chain saw roared to life, Cletus jumped back and yelled, "Whazzat noise!?" ...LA humor...

We often find ourselves seeking for power. We face obstacles or struggles in our lives, and we need power to overcome, to cope, to deal with all that is before us. Too often we feel powerless in the face of our difficulties. I think many times, like Cletus and his chain saw, there is a power available to us that we are not even aware of. If we could understand the power we have, our lives would be more energetic, more productive, and more faithful.

We find Jesus today at what seems to be the low point of his power. He has said some powerful words; he has done some powerful, miraculous deeds, but now he is broken, in custody, at the mercy of forces beyond his control. Last week we saw Jesus brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem and the surrounding

area. Pilate questioned Jesus, and when Jesus said that he came to testify to the truth, Pilate cynically asked him, “What is truth?”

Pilate offered to release Jesus for the Jews to celebrate Passover, but they cried out for Barabbas instead. Barabbas was some kind of a bandit or an insurrectionist against Rome. They would rather see this criminal released than Jesus.

Then, to underscore the humiliation, Pilate had Jesus flogged. The beating or scourging comes a little later in the accounts from the other Gospels, but it is the same thing—a brutal, bloody beating by Roman soldiers that often killed the men who received it before they ever got to the cross. It is important to remember that the rest of this conversation happens after Jesus has been beaten to a bloody pulp and given the crown of thorns and a purple robe to mock him..

Nevertheless, despite his cruel treatment of Jesus, Pilate brings him back out before the Jews and says he finds no case against him. Seeing the bloody Jesus incites the crowd to scream for his crucifixion. Then for the first time, they tell Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. This took Pilate aback a little, because Jesus had said that thing about the truth. What if this were true?

So Pilate takes Jesus back inside his headquarters and asks him, “Where are you from?” He’s not talking about geography; he’s talking about origin. He’s asking if Jesus really is the Son of God. Jesus doesn’t answer. This sets up the exchange that we are focusing on today. Pilate says, “*Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?*” Jesus answered him, “*You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.*”¹ Power. Pilate thinks he has the power. He has the upper hand. He has the authority over Jesus’ life. But does he have power? Jesus says not, that the apparent power Pilate has is a gift from above and not his own.

Finally Pilate brings Jesus back out to an outdoor courtyard with a judge’s bench to pronounce his sentence. If you go to Jerusalem today, they have excavated what the archeologists believe to be The

Stone Pavement or Gabbatha where Pilate condemned Jesus. Imagine the scene. Jesus, beaten and bloody, barely able to stand, the crowd, including many of the prominent leaders of the Jews, screaming for his death, and Pilate—the man in power, but plagued by doubts, deciding against his better judgment to hand Jesus over to be crucified. They gave Jesus the cross to carry on his own, and they began the slow, exhausting walk down the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows. It's only a kilometer, less than a mile, to the place where Jesus would die. You can still walk the path today—a short distance, but the longest walk in history.

Can you imagine a more broken, humiliated, defeated man than Jesus was at that moment? Yet we are bold to claim that was his finest hour. This was Jesus at his best. This was a moment of power that changed the course of human history. Pontius Pilate—a footnote in history. The Roman Empire—gone to the dust. Annas and Caiaphas—the answers to Biblical trivia questions. Yet almost a third of the people on this planet claim allegiance to Jesus Christ 2,000 years after he died. That is power.

The world has a different view of power. Power in human society is political power. Those who access power by inheritance, because they are a royal family, or those who are elected into positions of authority, they seem to have power.

Human power is economic power. Wealth brings power, because wealth can acquire things and get things done. Rich nations have power over poorer nations, because money makes the world go around, right? Economic power is not necessarily evil; neither is political power. But in the wrong hands or used the wrong way, such power can oppress and hurt and destroy.

Worldly power comes with fame. If lots of people know you, you have power. Movie stars can walk into a restaurant or club and get the best seat in the house. Famous people who may not know beans about a subject can nevertheless give their opinion, and people will pay attention.

We all know about worldly power. This is not the kind of power Jesus demonstrated when he stood before Pilate. Pilate had the political power; Jesus didn't. Even with the Romans in charge, the leaders of the Jews had political power over the people. Jesus had none. He had not been born into a prominent family, even though King David was his ancestor. He was never elected to anything.

Jesus had no economic power. He had a trade—carpentry—but it never would have made him rich, and after he went on the road teaching, he really had no job. He depended on the support of his followers.

Jesus had divine power, but he never chose to use it. He refused the temptation to throw himself off the Temple and have the angels catch him. In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus is arrested, he says, "*Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*"² Jesus never played the Son of God card and destroyed his enemies. Instead he let them destroy him. What kind of power was that?

Sam Wells, the author of *Hanging By A Thread: Questions of the Cross*, says, "Jesus is exercising power, but it's a different kind of power."³ The power of Jesus is the power of love. It was the unconditional love of God that sent Jesus into this world. It was love that held Jesus to the path of suffering for our sin. It is the love that Paul says is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that gives us power to hope.

The power of Jesus' love shows in his compassion. He cared for the children, the women, and the lepers, those who had no status in that society. He healed the sick and raised the dead. He wept by the tomb of his friend.

The power of Jesus' love shows in his forgiveness. He taught his disciples to practice forgiveness. He forgave the people who crucified him as he was hanging on the cross. He forgave the repentant thief who was crucified next to him.

But the greatest power of Jesus' love was the power of his sacrifice. It is incredible to me that he would endure what he did for you and me, to forgive us of our sins, to show us how to overcome suffering, to give us life. He illustrated with his actions what he had said to his disciples less than 24 hours before: *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends."*⁴

This is the power to which disciples—you and I—can aspire. In March 2018 a lone gunman took several people hostage in a French supermarket. Arnaud Beltrame, a French police officer, offered to trade places with a hostage during the standoff. Because of his actions the hostage lived, but officer Beltrame died. A spokesperson for French President Emmanuel Macron said that Beltrame "died in the service of the nation, to which he had already brought so much. By giving his life to put an end to the ... armed jihadist terrorist, he has fallen as a hero."

Beltrame's priest gave witness to the motivation behind his sacrifice. Father Jean-Baptiste wrote: "It seems to me that only his faith can explain the madness of this sacrifice which is today the admiration of all. He understood, as Jesus told us, that there is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friends. He knew that if his life belonged to [his wife] Marielle, it also belonged to God, to France and to his brothers in danger of death. I believe that only a Christian faith animated by charity could ask for this superhuman sacrifice."⁵

This is the power of Jesus. It's the power of the cross. Sam Wells writes: "This is what I believe the cross is. God always intended Jesus to come among us. Not to fix a problem, but to embody God's love. Incarnation came with a risk. ... When that risk was realized, God did not slink away, lash out, or call time. Instead, God underwent the full and horrifying consequences of that risk."⁶

Trevor Dennis is a British theologian who tells a parable about a desolate landscape. It was filled with garbage, dirty, stinking water, and run-down, boarded-up buildings. The people who lived there were silent, stooped, joyless. One day in the midst of the squalor, a seed took root. Nobody noticed the plant for several weeks, until it began to bloom. It was a sunflower. Eventually it stood five or six feet tall. Most of the people had never seen a sunflower. Some were changed by its beauty. They walked straighter and actually had a smile on their faces.

Mostly, however, the sunflower was ignored. But you can't ignore a big yellow sunflower forever. It showed up the drab, desolate surroundings for what it they were—ugly and dead. People became bitter about their place; the sunflower became intolerable. So one evening a great crowd came, and they destroyed the sunflower. They trampled it, danced on it, beat the fibers of the leaves and stem, and crushed its petals. Then they went away in silence.

But they had trampled the beautiful plant in the middle of summer, when the flower was full of ripe seed. In their dance of death, they scattered the seed and pushed many of the seeds into the ground. So the next spring the desolate landscape was desolate no more. It was covered with sunflowers.⁷

The ultimate power of the cross is that the cross is not the end of the story. The final power of Jesus is the far focus, the eternal view. We see the power of the story because we know the end of the story. Sam Wells says God sent Jesus to embody his love, that God took a risk in the incarnation, and when the whole enterprise went south, God endured the consequences. Then Wells continues, “But God also did one more thing. God disclosed the way the story ends. The way it ends was decided long before the story began. And that’s how God exposes the emptiness of [human] power. For power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes. But the final outcome, more than we desire or deserve, has already been decided.”⁸

The cross means that the followers of Jesus, like you and me, can take the risk of incarnating the love of God in this world, because we know that whatever the short-term consequences may be, the eternal outcome has already been decided.

Here is our hope, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*"⁹

The short-term consequences of following Jesus may not be pleasant. In fact, they could be sacrificial. But we live with a far focus, and we believe that the eternal outcome of our lives is with God. So we can live without fear. That's the power of love. That's the meaning of the cross.

¹ John 19:10-11.

² Matthew 26:53.

³ Samuel Wells, *Hanging By A Thread: Questions of the Cross* (New York: Church Publishing, 2016), 48.

⁴ John 15:13.

⁵ Jonathan Romig, *PreachingToday.com*.

⁶ Wells, 49f.

⁷ Trevor Dennis, *Speaking of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 80-82, in Wells, 48f.

⁸ Wells, 50.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.