

February 24, 2008
Matthew 16:13-20 / Mark 6:1-6 / Luke 4:14-30
Faith, Doubt and the Power of the Holy Spirit

One cannot read this text without noticing several very distinct themes:

The **FIRST** is in verses 14-21 where the obvious theme is Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy of the Christ who would come.

The **SECOND** is in verses 18-19 where the theme is a description of the nature of the ministry Jesus came to carry out — one that needs to be set before us again and again.

And the **LAST** is in verse 14, and then again in verses 22-27, where the theme is obviously the various responses people have to Jesus' claim that He was the Messiah toward whom all Scripture pointed, and about whom all the prophets prophesied.

So without any further delay (and without closing your Bibles!) let's look at those three themes in the order in which they come to us in the text, beginning with the **FIRST**: The theme of Jesus being the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy of the Christ who would come.

In verse 14 Luke says: "Jesus returned to Galilee in the **POWER** of the Spirit." At first it doesn't seem that significant. Yet it actually fulfills Isaiah's proclamation in verse 18, that "*The Spirit of the Lord would rest upon Jesus*" — which included an "anointing" with the Spirit's power.

It's also a statement that is meant to be contrasted with verse 1, where we read: Jesus went into the desert "*FULL of the Spirit.*" But today we read He came out of the desert, "*in the POWER of the Spirit.*" And the difference is more than coincidental. Luke seems to be pressing home the point that being filled with the Spirit and walking in the power of the Spirit are two different things.

It implies that somehow, in some inexplicable way, through His six week ordeal of fasting and disciplining Himself in godliness, and resisting temptation, and being trained in the art of spiritual warfare with Satan, Jesus had somehow "fanned into flames" the gift of the Spirit that had come upon Him in His baptism. And so He walks out of the desert six weeks later like One who had been **SUPERCHARGED** in the Spirit, and was now, as a result, ready to commence on the ministry God had sent Him to do.

What a word that is for us! So often we tend to think that all one needs to prepare them for spiritual ministry (Christian ministry) is a Bible School or Seminary education / a degree or piece of paper from some Christian institution of higher learning saying they've taken certain courses and acquired the right head knowledge.

But preparation for spiritual ministry is far more than simply having our doctrinal i's dotted and t's crossed. It also includes lengthy periods of time spent in secluded communion and quiet solitude with God / the development of the spiritual disciplines / engagement in spiritual warfare / an awareness of how Satan tempts and deceives / and in prayer that fans into flames the gift of the Spirit that resides within us. / If Jesus ordeal in the desert teaches us anything it teaches us that!

A ministry that calls its pastors and people to confront sin / and dislodge the idols people have in their hearts / and rebuke pride / and denounce greed / and speak out against selfishness and confront addictions / and encourage people to turn away from the sinful pleasures they love so much / and submit to the unconditional Lordship of God over their lives (which always arouses a fierce resistance in people who by nature do not want God to rule over them (Luke 19:14)) — that type of ministry cannot be done in one's own strength and power!

Roger Ellsworth is right when he says:

"The church, in order to maintain credibility in the world, has to have the power of God. She is involved in a great spiritual warfare, and only God's power will enable her to prevail. Human ingenuity and wisdom are simply not equal to the task. Trying to do this kind of work without the power of God is like trying to break huge granite boulders with our bare hands. The problem, as I see it, is that the church is trying to subsist on her own power. She is relying on her own abilities. Human wisdom can produce many things, and the church is trying to pass these things off as the hand of God at work, but the world is not buying it.... Are we really conscious of how utterly helpless and hopeless we are apart from God? Or are we relying on our own wisdom and ability in our warfare against Satan and his forces? If we are not careful we can think pushing all the right buttons will produce lasting spiritual results. We can reduce the work of the church to shrewd maneuvering with statistical probabilities and psychological jargon. We can be guilty of doing the very thing David refused to do — fight in Saul's armour. We can have polish but not power. We need to realize that God can do more in one minute with His power than we can in a lifetime with out strategies."

Remember, my friends, Christianity is not simply a matter of affirming certain doctrines and embracing conservative morality. It's not!

Paul says in Eph. 6:12: "Our struggle is NOT against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of darkness (or evil) in the heavenly realms."

Likewise he says in II Cor. 10:4: "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."

And what are "**Strongholds**"? LISTEN: *Strongholds are deeply ingrained patterns of sin in both the structures of society and the lives of individuals. They are sinful ways of thinking and reasoning and feeling and acting. They are deeply imbedded yet false concepts of God, hedonistic views of life, faulty objects of hope and trust, dysfunctional ways of dealing with conflict, and ingrained addictions or habits that leave people struggling with broken relationships and marriages and families — things caused by the presence and effects of "deeply ingrained strongholds" both in them and around them.*

And believe me — (if you haven't already discovered it for yourself) — when you move out to confront or demolish such strongholds you better not try to do it in your own strength! Because to "demolish such strongholds," says Paul, you need "divine power"! It's not optional, my friends, it's absolutely and indispensably essential!

It was for Jesus and it should be for us! As people baptized with, or filled with the same Spirit that filled Jesus at His baptism, we also must see our need not only to be filled, but to also walk in "the power of the Spirit."

For though it is true, as Ellsworth rightly pointed out, that with nothing but human wisdom and ingenuity and ability we can produce many things, but it is also true that they will be, little more than "cheap and shabby substitutes for the real power of God." Because true Christian ministry can only be carried out in the power or with the anointing of the Spirit. If Jesus example here in Luke chapter 4 has taught us anything, it has taught us that.

And it's the presence and power of the Spirit in Jesus and His ministry that should have assured people that Jesus was the Spirit anointed One Isaiah spoke about.

In His baptism the "Spirit of the LORD had come down upon Him" in fulfillment of verse 18a, and through the ordeal that followed in the desert the Spirit's anointing with power had somehow come to its fullness. And as He went throughout Galilee, people sensed that power. Better yet, they saw evidence of it, and thus *"news about Him spread throughout the whole countryside"* as He taught in their synagogues.

As He taught and preached *"in the power of the Spirit,"* the other things Isaiah referred to were fulfilled or took place in the ministry of Jesus — the poor or poor in spirit were evangelized / Those imprisoned (those held captive by those deeply ingrained sinful strongholds I just spoke about) were set free / Those who were blind (both spiritually and physically) recovered their sight / Those who were oppressed by demonic influences or things beyond their control found release from that oppression / And because of it, everyone sensed that the year (or the time) of God's favor had come to them, in and through the ministry of Jesus, because they saw the grace and power of God flowing through Him.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** theme — the nature or description of the ministry Jesus came to carry out. After going throughout the whole region of Galilee preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, Jesus finally comes to His hometown of Nazareth. And "as was His custom," we are told, He went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath day (on a Saturday), was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah from the attendant in charge, and started rolling it (from one of the rolling pins to the other) until He got to the part we know as Chapter 61 verses 1-2, and He began to read:
"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor (literally "to evangelize the poor"). He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It's a verse which gives us the **FIVE primary ministry objectives of Jesus** — objectives which should be ours as well. The **FIRST** is "evangelizing the poor." And as with ALL the different things spoken of in this verse (such as prisoners, the blind and the oppressed) they can all be taken either literally or metaphorically.

In fact, they certainly should be taken in BOTH senses: "THE POOR" can simply mean the poor, or it can mean the poor in spirit. "THE BLIND" can mean those who are actually blind, or it can mean those who are spiritually blind.

And "THE OPPRESSED" can mean those in society who are oppressed externally by unjust laws, social systems, or prejudice, or it can mean those who are oppressed internally by sinful thoughts, uncontrollable urges, unwanted desires, unhealthy addictions or demonic influences.

By nature we are all "poor," whether we be poor in the material sense, or rich in things but poor in spirit. And our goal in evangelizing is to preach in such a way that people actually come to see that regardless of how much money they have, it's really sin and a lack of relationship with God that makes them poor (even if they're indescribably rich by the world's standards).

The poorest person alive, by possessing God by faith, becomes incomparably rich / while the richest person alive, who does not possess God by faith, remains miserably poor.

Contrary to the American Health and Wealth Gospel, it's not financial prosperity that makes one rich, nor a lack of such prosperity that makes one poor — it's where they stand in relation to God. I've seen poor people who are poor and poor people who are rich; rich people who were poor and rich people who are "rich" — and it had nothing to do with their wealth!

Teresa of Avilla put it this way: *"He who possesses all things without God possesses nothing! But he who possesses God, and nothing else besides, possesses in Him all things."*

Alexander Maclaren likewise said: *"Our true wealth is God. No man that possesses Him, by love and trust and conformity of will...to His will, is poor, whatever else he has, or whatever else he lacks. And no man who has lost this one durable treasure... can be other than a pauper, whatever else he possesses."*

A. W. Tozer said the same: *"There is within the human heart a tough fibrous root of the fallen life whose nature it is to possess, always to possess. It covets 'things' with a deep and fierce passion... The roots of our hearts have grown down into 'things,' and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die. 'Things' have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended. God's gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution."*

And then he says what all of us should know so well from experience: *"We are often hindered from giving up our treasures to the Lord," he says, "for fear of their safety — this is especially true when those treasures are loved relatives and friends. But we need to*

have no such fears... Everything is safe which we commit to Him and nothing is really safe which is not committed to Him."

The poor, I believe, somehow find that easier to accept — that God Himself is the greatest of all treasures. That no earthly wealth and no accumulated fortune could ever compare with the "the riches of God's grace made known to us in Christ Jesus." As James (the brother of Jesus) says in his Epistle, *"Is it not the poor who are rich in faith?"* And most often the answer is, "Yes. It is."

Thus I say to you, that like Jesus we are called to proclaim to all the "poor people" here in Bucks County, Pennsylvania — and there are multitudes of them — the ones living on the streets and the ones living in million dollar homes (and everywhere in between)...

If you have it all but don't have God, you have nothing! For sin makes one poor even if they live in unimaginable opulence. And if you have nothing, yet have been found by God, and possess Him by faith, you are richer than you will ever know!

And then NEXT, sin not only impoverishes the soul, it "imprisons." That's the next aspect of Jesus ministry — proclaiming freedom for the prisoners. And again, it may refer to both — prisoners who languish in jail, not because they have done anything worse than anyone else, but because they are victims of the sin of society, or the sin of prejudice, or the sin of an unjust social system, or their parents sin visited upon them.

Just as one example I was reading of lately (in a book entitled "American Gospel") when John Quincy Adams (the devout Christian and former president) was 73 years old, he took it upon himself to go to the Supreme Court and fight for the abolition of slavery. It was 1841, and the battle was so intense and the injustice so ingrained in our society that he could write this in his diary:

"I cannot resist... the magnitude, the danger, the insurmountable burden of labour to be encountered in the undertaking to touch upon the slave-trade... The world, the flesh, and all the devils in hell are arrayed against any man, who now, in this North-American Union, shall dare to join the standard of the Almighty God, to put down the African slave trade. And what can I, upon the verge of my 74th birthday, with shaking hand, a darkening eye, a drowsy brain, and with all my faculties dropping from me...as my teeth are from my head — what can I do for the cause of God and man?"

To break or demolish such a “stronghold” would require the ***POWER of the Spirit***. Because as Paul had said: ***“Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world...”***

And by that Paul doesn’t simply mean demonic forces (which he does go on to mention later in the verse, saying, ***“and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*** It did include demonic forces, but was not limited to that. No, by ***“rulers... of this dark world,”*** Paul surely means “evil rulers” (like Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, and an endless list of other — kings and queens and emperors, and presidents, and prime ministers).

And by ***“authorities... of this dark world,”*** Paul most likely means “corrupt authorities” (like unjust judges, and bad cops, and town officials who take bribes, and shady lawyers, or anyone who uses or abuses their “position of authority” in government, or business, or church, or anywhere else to exploit, oppress, harass, ruin, imprison or simply get rich off the misfortune of others.

Yet its not just unfair social structures, or unjust laws, or corrupt rulers and officials that can imprison, and require “the POWER of the Spirit” to confront and unseat. / It’s also the sin that dwells in the heart and soul of every living person — and can likewise be unseated by nothing but “the POWER of the Holy Spirit.”

Who here has NEVER wrestled so intensely with some behavior, or urge, or desire, or attitude; some reoccurring thought, or sinful passion, or fleshly appetite, or habitual tendency that you honestly thought you could never overcome it? Is there anyone here who has NOT found yourself (on occasion) seemingly “powerless” to stop yourself from wanting or doing the very thing you knew you shouldn’t want or do?

You know what I’m talking about, right? Nod in the affirmative if you know what I’m talking about! The Apostle Paul speaks of this struggle when he says in Rom. 5:6, ***“When we were still powerless*** (that is, powerless to gain victory over sin in our lives, or powerless to save ourselves from its influences over our feelings, affections, attitudes)... ***When we were still powerless (against those things), Christ died for the ungodly.”***

As unbelievers, says Paul, we were slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6). / That sin reigned or ruled in our mortal bodies (6:12). / That it was our master (6:14). / That we were “weak in our natural selves” and thus “in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness.”

(Rom. 6:19) / That we were controlled by the sinful nature (7:5), and could not carry out the good we desired to do! (7:18) / "I have the desire to do what is good, Paul says, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do, no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. And if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin living in me that does it." (7:18-20)

That, my friends, is about the clearest description you will ever hear of what it means to be "imprisoned" by sin — not the sin of **OTHERS**, but the sin that dwells in **YOU**. And Jesus knew that that was your condition. That's why He came to proclaim the Good News that there is freedom for those who are "prisoners of sin!" The Good News that there is release for those who are "captives to the law of sin" that dwells within! You can be freed from your captivity or imprisonment to sin!

You can't do it, says Paul! Try as hard as you like, for as long as you like, with as much will-power as you like, and you will NEVER, apart from the grace of Jesus, win the battle over sin and its destructive effects in your life. You simply cannot do it by yourself!

In fact, admitting and confessing that to God is the first step in gaining any victory at all over sin! That's what Paul does in verse 18. He says: *"I CANNOT carry it out."* I'm POWER-LESS against sin! SIN is more powerful than my own will to resist it! I can't do it, Lord. You must win the victory for me or it will NEVER BE WON at all!

Until you (like Paul) confess that, you will NEVER be liberated from the dominion it holds over your life! You must give up before grace can take over! You must simply cast yourself, sin and all, upon the mercy and grace that is in Jesus.

That is what God wants. He loves to hear the words, *"I can't do it Lord. I need You."* In fact, that's what Paul essentially says as he ends the chapter. After confessing he's a prisoner of the law of sin at work within his members (v. 24), he cries out: *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"*

And when he calls himself a *"wretched man"* he doesn't mean he's a deplorable piece of scum! It's not a word of deplorability (as we're often led to think). It's a word of inability! Our English word "wretch" comes from the Antiquated Saxon word "wrecca" which means "wreck"— like a ship that's run aground on the rocky shore and been stranded there after the storm waters recede!

And it's a "wreck" for two reasons: 1.) Because it's been damaged (as we have been by the effects of sin). And 2.) Because it has no way to get itself back into the water! It's helpless! It's powerless to fix itself by itself. It can't hoist itself back into the water! It can't save itself or put itself where it needs to be! It needs someone or something outside itself to come along and do that for it!

It's not, then, a word of deplorability but inability! That's why, after declaring himself to be a "wretched man" (or a wreck), he immediately goes on to say: "*Who will rescue me...?*" Who will do for me what I cannot humanly do for myself?

And what's the answer he gives? "*Thanks be to God — through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" That's why Jesus came, according to Isaiah — to set the prisoner free! To liberate the weak and powerless sinner from the otherwise inescapable dominion sin holds over our lives!

How does He do it? By forgiving it! "*He breaks the power of canceled sin and sets the prisoner free,*" as Charles Wesley once wrote. He empties sin of its power over our lives by pardoning and forgiving it through the blood and sacrifice of Jesus, and thus removing from us the curse and condemnation of the law.

And that's not all. By living a life of perfect obedience to the law Jesus freed us from its demands. "*Sin shall no longer be your master,*" says Paul, "*because you are not under law, but under grace.*" Christ LIVED to free us from the law's DEMANDS / DIED to free us from the law's CURSE and CONDEMNATION by forgiving all our sins and thereby emptying sin of the power and dominion it held over us / And then HE SENT HIS SPIRIT TO INDWELL US and do for us by His power what we could not do for ourselves, powerless as we were to do it in our own strength! **What a flawless remedy for the human condition!**

I'm not going to get to the other three aspects of Jesus ministry, am I?

His giving sight to the blind and the spiritually blind whom He enlightens with truth as His Holy Spirit takes the blinders away from our eyes and breaks the "strongholds" over our minds through the Gospel.

His releasing the oppressed — including those oppressed by satanic influences.

It's all part of Jesus ministry — proclaiming the year, or the time, of God's favor.

That's what the Gospel does. It tells you "God cares about you." It says to you "I offer you the grace you so desperately need, and the spiritual power you so obviously lack."

It says " I've come to help, restore, release and set you free — to save you from the devastating effects sin has had and continues to have over your life."

It says, You can have victory in your life over sin. People don't have to sit amidst the wreckage of their shattered lives with no hope.

No matter where you've been, or what you've done, God offers you, today, a different future. ***"I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*** (Jer. 29:11).

The people in Nazareth rejected both Jesus and that message. They could have been "rich," but they chose to remain "poor." / Their souls could have been "set free," but they chose to remain shut up in their prisons (like so many today). / They could have gained sight, but they chose to remain blind to the very one who offered them everything they needed.

In fact, they tried to kill Him. Don't you make the same mistake! If the Holy Spirit is speaking to you today, right now, don't kill that impulse. Don't leave here, drag it out to the street (like they did Jesus) or into your car, drive down the ridge and simply let it die.

Respond in prayer. Respond to the Spirit's prompting.

Surrender to the Spirit's power and leading.

Embrace Him by faith and watch Him do what He came to do — transform your life.