

The Context of the Word's Power

Acts 20:33-38

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 1-25-2009

Introduction – last week we looked at the power of the Word (v. 32)

Last week we looked at the incredible power of the Word of God. It is living and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword. It protects us, grows us, changes us, turns enemies into friends and performs many powerful things in our lives. When we take the Word upon our lips and affirm it by faith, we see miracles happen, financial provision, demons fleeing and many needs met. So last week we looked at the power of God's Word.

But there is always a danger of taking a verse out of context. And I think that is definitely true of verse 32. We must not think that God's power is wrought in our lives entirely apart from our human responsibility; anymore than we would think that God can bless a farmer apart from him planting, watering, trimming, weeding and harvesting. God blesses us in the context of covenantal faithfulness. I think Deuteronomy 28 is so clear on that. And a word picture that helps me as I think about this is the man with the withered hand. Let me read Matthew 12:13. **“Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched *it* out, and it was restored as whole as the other.”** Notice that the healing happened as he stretched forth his hand. If the man had said, “Lord, I can't stretch forth my hand. You need to heal it first, and then I will stretch it forth, his hand might never have been healed. It was as he obeyed Christ's command and willed to do the impossible that the power of Christ's words healed his hand. It was in a context of covenant faith and faithfulness that God's power was manifested. And that is true for most aspects of the power of the Word that we looked at last week. Let's go through each verse quickly to see what things will rob us of this power, and then return to these verses and look at them positively as the context in which such power is seen.

I. Things that will rob you of God's power

A. *Covetousness (v. 33)*

The first thief is covetousness. When you let covetousness creep into your heart, it will rob you of any benefit and any power that is inherent in

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God's Word. Verse 33 says, "**I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.**" That's the context in which Paul had such power in his ministry. He had a steward's heart. This is such an irony. It is when we covet that we end up losing blessing. The very covetousness that wishes we could steal ends up stealing from us.

This means that God's power is not channeled to those who are self-seeking. It is channeled to those who will use everything for God's glory. Millions of dollars were channeled through the hands of George Mueller because God could trust Mueller to use it for His kingdom. He wasn't idolatrously hanging on to it. He was not covetous, and he had incredible power in his ministry. Contrast that with Isaiah 57's description of why one man could not find power. He starts first with a description of who His power resides with: Isaiah 57:15 says, "**For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.'**" He dwells with that kind of a person. Then comes his description of the one that He could not bless with His power: "**For the iniquity of his covetousness I was angry and struck him; I hid and was angry...**" Here was a man who did not have God with Him because He was covetous. If last week's sermon made you long for the power of God's Word, then heed Psalm 119:36, which says, "**Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness.**"

B. Laziness (v. 34)

The second thing that will rob us is laziness. There are some who look at the enormous power of the word last week, and they would want to sit back in an easy chair and watch God work. But God works to bless our diligence, whether it is diligent work, investment or even memorization of Scripture. Paul said in verse 34, "**Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.**" He was diligent.

C. Lack of compassion (v. 35a)

The third thing that robs us of power is lack of compassion. Verse 35 says, "**I have shown you in every way; by laboring like this, that you must support the weak.**" Isaiah 40:20-31 is the famous passage on how those who wait upon Yahweh shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. But it starts by answering a complaint from Israel, where God says,

“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel: ‘My way is hidden from Yahweh, and my just claim is passed over by my God’” They were wondering why God was not with them, answering their prayers, and giving them victory. And God’s answer was in these next three verses was to say what He delights in. He said, **“He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength.”** How is that an answer? Well, it was an answer because these guys were not reflecting God’s heart. When our heart reflects God’s heart by supporting the weak ourselves, God delights in manifesting His power in our own weakness. But when we ignore the plight of the weak, God ignores our weakness. In fact, He says in verse 24 that as soon as you plant something He will blow upon it and destroy it. Lack of compassion robs us of God’s blessing.

D. Lack of generosity (v. 35b)

The third thing that robs us of God’s power is a lack of generosity. Verse 35 continues by saying, **“And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”** When our focus is on “give me so that I can *have*” rather than “give me so that I can give and use it in your kingdom,” we are not standing in the channel of the rivers of God’s blessings.

E. Prayerlessness (v. 36)

The fifth context of power is prayer. Verse 36 says, **“And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.”** We all know that prayerlessness leads to powerlessness.

F. Lack of heart (v. 37)

G. Lack of love for the brethren (v. 38)

The sixth and seventh robbers of power are lack of heart and lack of love for the brethren. Verses 37-38 say, **“Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.”** Contrast that with the way Corinth treated Paul and the other brethren and you will see why Ephesus was far more blessed than Corinth was.

I see all of that as a context within which God loves to bless, and the absence of those things frequently explains the lack of powerful blessing. All you need to do is read 1 Corinthians and you will see why that church

was receiving judgments rather than blessings from God's hand. Many were weak and sickly and some had even died from God's power.

I didn't want to spend much time on what could rob us of the power in verse 32, because it is only hinted at here. I didn't feel that it warranted a lot of time.

But now, I want to focus the bulk of this sermon on understanding and applying the positive virtues that are illustrated in the remaining verses of this chapter under point II. I want to show how it is impossible to have the qualities that Paul had without reaping a harvest. You will reap a harvest if you have these qualities.

II. The people in whom God loves to wield the power of His Word

A. Stewards (v. 33)

Let's back up to verse 33 again, which shows that Paul had a steward's heart instead of being covetous. Paul said, "**I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.**" That's an amazing statement! Earlier that year Paul had written Romans, and in Romans 7 he said that covetousness was something he struggled and struggled with in his early Christian years. Covetousness was such a habit that he did it without even thinking. In Romans 7:7-8 says, "**I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire...**" Paul did the things that he didn't want to do and he failed to do the things that he wanted to do. And it happened so much that he complained, "**O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?**" That's as far as some Reformed people get. They never stop bemoaning themselves and their hopeless condition. They think Romans 7 is to be their fate the rest of their lives. But Paul does not stop there. He ends chapter 7 by saying, "**I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!**" *That's* who will deliver you. And then he shows in chapter 8 how every believer can gain victory over even the lusts of their heart. Granted, we will always have new discoveries of the deceitfulness of sin within us, but we can come to place where we lick those besetting sins as Paul did in this verse of Acts 20:33. Don't give up on your fight against sin. The power of God's Word can sanctify you. Take Paul's testimony seriously.

Here it turned Paul from a hopelessly covetous man into a man who could honestly say concerning the past three years he had been in Ephesus,

“I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel.” He had learned how to conquer his covetousness. Have you learned that? Paul had learned how to have a steward’s heart. And what blessings we receive when we do the same. God trusts us with more and more blessings. In the parable of the talents, Jesus said to the men who were faithful with the money that they had been given, **“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”** (v. 23). Do you want to enter more fully into the power of God’s Word that we saw in verse 32? Then work diligently by God’s grace to conquer covetousness and to have a steward’s heart. You cannot help but increase your stewardship.

B. Diligent (v. 34)

The second pre-requisite to such blessing is diligence. Verse 34 again: **“Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.”** Some of you desire that God would prosper you with more material wealth. If you have a steward’s heart, such a desire is noble and good. There is nothing wrong with the wealth of an Abraham just because Solomon abused his wealth. There is nothing wrong with the finances of a Simon Peter just because a Judas Iscariot abused finances. So desiring greater finances is not a problem. But God doesn’t usually land wealth miraculously into our bank account – “Wow! Where did that come from?” God’s blessings of any stripe are usually provided in the midst of diligence. See faith and responsibility as going hand in hand. Say, “Lord, I trust you to provide for me by prospering the work of my hands.” Don’t say, “Lord, I trust you to provide for me so that I can relax.” Does that make sense? Diligence is part of the covenant faithfulness that God promises to bless in Deuteronomy 28. And the Deuteronomy 28 blessings go way beyond what our human efforts can achieve. They truly are miraculous blessings. But they are blessings given in the context of covenant faithfulness.

C. Compassionate (v. 35a)

The third key to blessing is being compassionate. Verse 35 says, **“I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak.”** There will always be weak people who will test our hearts on whether we have compassion or not. Where is your heart? Compassion is our willingness to help the weak. It’s mercy ministries.

D. Generous (v. 35b)

Fourth, generosity is the visible manifestation of that compassion. So verse 35 goes on to say, “**And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’**” Why is it more blessed to give than to receive? Because that’s the way God has established His spiritual world. Proverbs 11:24 says, “**There is *one* who scatters, yet increases more; and there is *one* who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty.**” That doesn’t make sense from a purely mathematical perspective. If you were to look at life without spiritual eyes you would think that being miserly is the way to wealth. But God chooses to miraculously bless the person who loves to give. God gives back in more abundance. Luke 6:38 says, “**Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom.**” But God in His providence also likes to withhold blessings from those who hold back, and it can eventually lead to poverty. Here’s how Paul words it in 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

2Corinthians 9:6 ¶ But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

2Corinthians 9:7 So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.

2Corinthians 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

2Corinthians 9:9 As it is written:

*“He has dispersed abroad,
He has given to the poor;
His righteousness endures forever.”*

2Corinthians 9:10 ¶ Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness,

2Corinthians 9:11 while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God.

Wow! Paul heaps promise upon promise of the provision and grace that God loves to give to those who are generous. And let me assure you that this principle does not just apply to the financial world. When you are generous in your discipleship of your children, God loves to multiply the effects of what you have done many times over. When you are generous in hospitality, love, encouragement, in overcoming evil with good, He causes His power to flow.

E. Prayerful (v. 36)

The fifth key to blessing is prayer. And prayer was the constant impulse of Paul's heart. He didn't think of leaving people without praying for them. He didn't think of traveling, preaching, witnessing or doing anything without committing it to prayer. So verse 36 says, "**And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.**"

I want you to notice this mode of prayer - kneeling. While there are other modes of prayer mentioned in the Bible, this is perhaps the most frequent. Kneeling shows our position of subservience and dependence upon God. I have many times wished that we could have kneeling pads on the chairs in front of us to allow us to kneel in prayer. I've been reluctant to ask you to do so in this congregation because it would be really awkward to kneel without having your forehead bumping the person in front of you or kicking your chair back into someone's legs behind you. Turning around in the rows and kneeling on your own chair might work, but they are pretty close together to be able to do it effectively – especially if you are large.

But let me at least encourage you to feel free to try kneeling in prayer if you are able and it wouldn't unduly squish people around you. We want you to feel free to stand, kneel or sit even if others are doing something else. But especially during the prayers of confession and supplication, kneeling is such an appropriate posture. And God loves the humility it displays and he loves the prayers that we offer up. Let's be a people of prayer. And I would encourage you to at least in your families imitate Paul by kneeling. He wasn't embarrassed that people on the ship would think he was weird. Kneeling was such an appropriate action for a person who is looking to the Maker of the universe for grace and power.

F. Full hearted (v. 37)

The next thing we see in Paul was a full-hearted man. The heart is made up of mind, will and emotions totally in tune with God's will and freely expressed by the body with the brethren. Some people are too reserved in expressing their mind, their will or their emotions. But look at verse 37: "**Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him.**" They wept freely. They weren't trying to stuff their emotions as if they were inappropriate. Instead, a full-hearted expression of care for each other was seen as the most appropriate thing, given these circumstances. It's OK to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Romans commands us to do so. The Ephesians had full-heartedness. Corinth seemed to lack it in large measure when Paul wrote his first letter to them,

but by the time he wrote 2 Corinthians, this full-heartedness had been restored to most of the Corinthian church. So we can put it on again. Full-heartedness is having the whole heart engaged – mind, will and emotions. Read David's Psalms and you will see why he was a man after God's own heart. David was full-hearted. He expressed his mind, his will and his emotions. I grew up stuffing my emotions for so long that it was tough for me to be full-hearted. I had to give my reservations to the Lord and practice this.

Notice too that these grown men hugged each other and kissed each other. This too is an area that has been robbed from the men of America. You will find this in Italy, South America, the Middle East and most of Africa. It's just the English, Germanics, Swedes and Americans who are so stodgy. I'm not going to force you to give me hugs and kisses. In fact, in this church everyone knows that until you are convinced that something is Biblical, you are free to disagree with my teaching. I want you to be Bereans. But let me read you a few New Testament commands to show that we really ought to be more full-hearted like these Ephesians were.

In Luke 7:45 Jesus rebukes Simon the Pharisee saying, "**You gave Me no kiss...**" In Israel, this was expected of hosts. Withholding the kiss was tantamount to saying that Jesus was not fully welcomed.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus said, "**But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.**" Now I grew up not doing any of this stuff. My Dad loved me, but he was a White Anglo Saxon Protestant like me, and he shook my hand when he dropped me off to Boarding School at the age of six. A lot of Europeans are not real expressive physically like the people in the Bible were. So I can understand if you struggle with this. After College, I had a hard time hugging anybody, so I started practicing with my sister and my mother, and then my close friends. And I found that hugging helped me to grow in my relationships.

Well, what about the kissing part? There are five times that the New Testament commands us to give one another a holy kiss. This Friday I discovered what a cultural shock to the Romans this was. I had always thought most first century cultures did this. But that is not true. The Romans were just as uncomfortable with this as you and I are. Let me start by reading Paul's command to the Roman Gentile Christians.

Romans 16:16 "**Greet one another with a holy kiss.**" You could try to explain this away as a Jewish custom that Paul was imposing on the

Gentiles, but we have already discovered that Paul fought aggressively against any imposition of Jewish culture upon the Gentiles, and here he is writing to Gentiles. And what is most surprising is that Paul is not only commanding something that the Romans were not culturally used to doing, Paul was commanding civil disobedience on this issue of the kiss. I just discovered that this past week. Let me read from one scholar on Rome: He says,

According to the Roman historian Suetonius (c. 69-140 A.D.), the end result of this¹ was that the Emperor Tiberius banned anyone from using the "cotidiana oscula," that is, the friendly kiss of greeting.

Since Tiberius reigned from 14 AD to 37 AD, it shows the period immediately prior to writing to Rome, Romans were not allowed to give this friendly greeting with a kiss. It was actually illegal. As one book said,

Therefore, we know that Paul was encouraging these churches to do something which was contrary to their own culture and even against the law! Paul was very familiar with their culture because he lived in these areas for months and even years, so he knew of the raised eyebrows and hardship that the practice of the holy kiss might bring to those who practiced it.

And actually, we do have evidence from the first and second centuries that Romans ridiculed Christians for kissing one another. That brings the whole question of whether we think this is weird today into a whole new light. So if you think this is cultural, there are four arguments you will need to deal with: *First*, we have two Roman historians (Suetonius and Marcus Aurelius) who state that it was not cultural. *Second*, we have one Roman historian (Sudetonius) who stated that it was actually illegal. For Paul to buck both culture and law means that it must have been a significant practice for Paul. *Third*, the command for a holy kiss was given to Rome, Greek Corinth, Thessalonica and Peter's congregation. That means that it is cross cultural, and applied to all churches. *Fourth*, it is called a "holy kiss." The word "holy" means that it is set apart by God. So that is a lot of evidence that God wants us expressing our affection for each other in the body in more than words. We are a family. And (granted) because we are family you can laugh at me over this or disagree with me. But I do want you to at least give me the courtesy of thinking about it. I've had men like Chet tell me that he misses the hugs that his other church gave. So don't think that this might seem

¹ The recent innovation of some Romans kissing one another in greeting (perhaps out of Christian circles??).

weird to visitors. They might even be amazed as the pagans were of the love and affection that the church displayed toward each other in the early church. It may have seemed odd to the Romans, but Tertullian said that the pagans were still very impressed with the love that Christians had for each other.

How did the early church do this? The evidence that I see was either a kiss on one cheek, a kiss on both cheeks. That's hinted at by the expressing, "fell on Paul's neck." It's sort of like what the Arabs do.

Was the kiss given to both men and women? The evidence is divided. A PCA pastor, whose whole church gives the holy kiss, says "Yes," while others say no. The early church father, Justin Martyr, writing in 160 AD said, "then let the men apart, and the women apart, salute each other with a kiss in the Lord." It was men kissing men and women kissing women. Certainly here it is men kissing Paul. Right? Now I know some of you guys are squirming in your chairs. But there is more evidence that Paul meant what he said:

Despite some cultural nervousness over this, a history of the church and a history of this practice tells us that they practiced this well into the twelfth and even thirteenth centuries in the West.² In the East the church has never stopped practicing it. During the Middle Ages it gradually began to disappear in some regions.³ Then some of the pre-Reformation groups like the Albigenses and the Waldenses revived this practice in the 1100's. During the Swiss Reformation, the holy kiss was revived and practiced widely by a part of the Reformation church, though many Protestants neglected it. In the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland that I attended, the elders seemed to kiss everybody – and at that time it made me nervous. When I was down in Shreveport, a PCA pastor challenged me to rethink this issue. His whole church obeys these Scriptures literally. And I was flabbergasted. "You've got to be kidding?!" But he pointed out, what alternatives do we have? We can't say it was just a Jewish custom because the New Testament five times commands it to the church as a whole. We can't say that it is simply a cultural tradition because Paul was bucking both Roman culture *and* Roman law. It can't be seen as simply a recommendation, because it is listed as a command five times. Let me read those to you.

² The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church: "Since the time of St. Augustine, it was only the communicants who exchanged the kiss, a custom prevailing until the 13th Century" See also, The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge: "In Western Christendom the kiss of peace continued to be observed until the waning period of the Middle Ages, though it is open to question to what extent and in what particular forms"

³ The Kiss And its History, 1901, Dr. Christopher Nyrop, (reissued in 1968), p. 106.

Romans 16:16 “**Greet one another with a holy kiss.**”

1Corinthians 16:20 **All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.**

2Corinthians 13:12 **Greet one another with a holy kiss.**

1Thessalonians 5:26 **Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.** [Wow! If we interpret that literally, there are no exceptions. And I think what is significant about that is that nobles embrace commoners in the Christian faith as brothers and sisters. In fact, this is probably one of the things that the Roman Emperor was so scandalized about. This practice (which the Romans saw as a recent innovation) was destroying the social strata in his mind. “Nobles and commoners as brothers and sisters! No way!” But God says, “Yeah, way.” Paul commands them, “Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.”]

1Peter 5:14 **Greet one another with a kiss of love.**

The evidence for this being an abiding command is so overwhelming, that even stodgy old John Murray, who was one of these old Scottish scholars who had a hard time showing any emotion, said that this is a binding command. He’s dead now, but he was a teacher at Westminster Seminary and wrote one of the most famous commentaries on the book of Romans. Listen to his lament of how this has been lost to the Western church. He says,

There can be no question but the kiss was practiced as the token of Christian love... It betrays an unnecessary reserve, if not loss of the ardour of the church’s first love, when the holy kiss is conspicuous by its absence in the Western Church.” (p. 232).

Now again, you have to be Bereans to see if this is so. But here’s my recommendation – while it is fresh on our minds, let’s have the bolder among us give one another a holy kiss after this service – men with men and women with women. How do you do it? Not on the lips. The holy kiss was a kiss on the cheek. Or if you prefer, you can do it Arab style with a fake kiss both cheeks. Let me illustrate.

[Illustration of how it works with a volunteer. Some chitchat... “I recommend going for the right cheek, or if you are really glad to see someone, the right cheek first. And I recommend that you give some kind of blessing at the same time – “The Lord bless you,” or “Shalom,” or some other blessing....]

I think we need to wonder if we are missing something when we don’t express our affections outwardly. Football players do. And their physical

hugs give them camaraderie. Nobody questions that they are gay. I know what's going through your minds. ☺ And for me the question is, "What spiritual benefits or other benefits am I missing when I neglect this aspect of God's Word." Sometimes those blessings may be intangible. But you can't take God at His Word without receiving blessings. And as Proverbs says, "The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and He adds no sorrow with it." I'm convinced that there is a blessing attached to every commandment of God. So don't rob me of the blessing. Expect to get smacked on the cheek unless you give me a warning that you're still thinking about it. OK? And I will fully respect your still thinking about it comment and leave you alone.

G. Loving (v. 38)

The last key to the power of God's Word that we saw last week, is the love and relationship and caring that is expressed in verse 38: "...**sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.**" What a beautiful ending to the chapter. Paul had a deep love for these people and they had a deep love for him and for each other. They were family. Some of you have said that you have experienced the same thing - your relationships within the church have in some ways been deeper and richer than your relationships with your physical family, because your physical family is not yet saved.

And there are many Scriptures that speak of God's power or God's blessing flowing in the midst of brethren whose hearts are knit like this. My favorite one is Psalm 133. Let me read that Psalm in its entirety.

Psalms 133:1 ¶ **Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is*
For brethren to dwell together in unity!**

Psalms 133:2 ***It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his garments.***

Psalms 133:3 ***It is like the dew of Hermon,
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the LORD commanded the blessing —
Life forevermore.***

There God commanded the blessing.

Conclusion

Don't rob yourselves of the blessings God has in store for you. Like the man with the withered hand, don't be passive. Put away covetousness

and laziness and be stewards who are diligent, compassionate, generous, prayerful, full hearted and loving. And as God pours blessings into your life (as He will), may you use those blessings for God's kingdom and God's glory. Amen.

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Acts 20:33-38

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 1-25-2009

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