

**STIRRING UP ADVENT:
RECIPES FOR RELATIONSHIPS
(3) GOD'S EMPOWERMENT**

John 1:1-14

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PROLOGUE

Orville and Wilbur Wright persevered in their attempts to get their new flying machine off the ground. On a December day at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Orville achieved the first recorded manned flight in a heavier-than-air vehicle. What a moment of triumph! The brothers ran to the nearest Western Union office and wired their sister Katherine, "We did it. We have actually flown in the air 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas."

Excited about her brothers' achievement, Katherine took the telegram to the local newspaper editor. He glanced at the message and seemed duly impressed. His story in the next edition of the local newspaper was headlined, "Orville and Wilbur Wright Will Be Home for Christmas." - he had totally missed the story of the century!

Are we like that newspaper editor? Do we think we know what Christmas will bring and yet miss the real story of God's amazing, empowering love?

SCRIPTURE

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {2} He was in the beginning with God. {3} All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being {4} in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. {5} The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. {6} There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. {7} He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. {8} He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. {9} The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. {10} He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. {11} He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. {12} But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, {13} who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. {14} And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-14 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three weeks we have been exploring the stages of relationships according to Jack and Judith Balswick in their book, *The Family: A Christian Perspective On The Contemporary Home*. As they have stated, God's relationship with us is a model for healthy relationships with one another for they contain the same ingredients. These "ingredients" in God's recipe for wholesome relationships include: covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy. Covenant establishes an enduring relationship based on commitment and promise. Grace sustains the relationship through unconditional love and forgiveness. Empowerment allows a relationship to grow and adapt to changing circumstances. Empowerment is the ingredient we will examine today.

1. THE MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

A common definition of power as it applies to relationships is the ability to influence another person. In any given significant relationship the persons involved will have an effect on each other. The greater the effect, the greater is the power. This is probably why we speak of the tremendous power of love.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett was bed-ridden for many years. Robert Browning came to see her. It was a delightful experience. So much so that she managed to raise her head from the pillow. Upon the second visit she was able to sit up in bed. On the third visit they eloped. Such is the power of love.

Unfortunately, according to research cited by the Balswicks, the most common use of power in relationships is to try to decrease the power of the other person in order to try to control them. Now sometimes control can be a necessary thing such as with parents watching over their small children or the care of a mentally incapacitated adult. But most of the time it is a negative thing. The desire to control people destroys healthy relationships and can lead to verbal or even physical abuse. At the core of almost every domestic abuse case are issues of power and control.

There is an alternative to the worldly use of power in our relationships. It is called "empowerment." Empowerment is a biblical model for using one's own power to help others become stronger. It never involves intimidation or force. It is a respectful process that takes place between people in mutually encouraging ways. The Balswicks describe empowering "as the process of helping another recognize strengths and potentials within, as well as encouraging and guiding the development of these qualities (p. 28)." It's helping the other person be everything God desires them to be.

Empowerment does not mean you have to give in to the other person's every wish. It does not mean you have to throw away your own power. Rather, empowerment means coming alongside the person and affirming his or her gifts and encouraging them to reach

their full potential.

If covenant is the commitment to a loving relationship and grace the atmosphere of acceptance, empowerment is the action of God in and through our lives to help others be strengthened, built up, and made whole. The supreme example of empowerment is the coming of Jesus Christ. He said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10b NRSV). Empowerment means we help people experience the abundant life Christ offers.

This is possible because of the kind of power we have experienced. John says:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (1:12-13).

The power to become the children of God does not come from the natural order. It is not something you inherit from your parents. It is not the result of human convention. It is nothing less than the power of God received through faith in Jesus Christ. This is power of a personal order, power mediated to those who do not have power. Paul says:

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for [us]" (Rom 5:6 TNIV).

While still in our helpless and sinful condition, God gives us the power to become the children of God. This is the ultimate example of human empowerment. We are empowered by God to empower others.

2. THE NATURE OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is love in action. It is the mark of Jesus we most need to imitate. Jesus rejected the use of power to control people but instead affirmed the use of power to help people. We lift the fallen, forgive the guilty, help the weak, and enable the unable.

The nature of empowerment requires a willingness to serve and be served. We see this again and again in the life of Jesus. For example:

When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him (Matt 8:14-15 NRSV).

Jesus was a willing servant to Peter's mother-in-law. Then she became a willing servant to Jesus and Jesus was willing to be served. Empowerment takes place in relationships

when there is a willingness to serve and be served.

There are those in life who like to receive but never give. But my experience and observations tell me that Christians, especially older Christians with grown children, tend to want to give and not receive. The motivation for this may be noble but I suspect, in many cases it is out of fear — the fear of losing control. If one party in a relationship is unwilling to both serve AND be served then there is no mutuality. If there is no mutuality the relationship cannot grow.

Let me come at this a different way. There is a widely held secular view that power is a limited commodity so a person must grab for as much power as possible in relationships. This is accomplished through manipulation, lies, withholding affection, or even outright coercion. But this striving for power turns the relationship into an antagonizing competition where someone has to be the winner and someone has to be the loser. (Actually, I would argue that both end up being losers.)

Now it is at this point that I need to point out that Christians have an advantage. We know that the power of God is available in unlimited supply. We do not have to strive for power. Our relationships do not have to be marked by antagonizing competition. They can be cooperative ventures where each person is built up and encouraged and there are no losers.

Let me apply this to parent/child relationships. Again, it is a widely held assumption that power is in limited supply. So what happens is that parents fear that as their children grow older and gain more of their own power, that the parents will lose theirs. Consequently, this fear cause some parents to try to control their children even after they have reached adulthood, out of the mistaken belief this will prevent the loss of power.

Empowerment, on the other hand, brings a healthier approach to the parent/child relationship. Through empowerment parents and children will both achieve personal power, self esteem and wholeness. Your authority as a parent may lessen over time, should lessen over time, but if your goal has been to help your child reach his or her full potential then your personal power may actually increase over time.

Empowerment is the goal. We need to release our children to their own control. Will mistakes be made? Yes. Is it hard to let our children make their own mistakes? Yes, especially if they are the same dumb mistakes we made when we were young. But this is a necessary transition for the health and wholeness of both parent and child.

In our other relationships as well we are called to live out extraordinary social patterns. Even though we make mistakes and have many shortcomings, God allows us to use the

empowering principle. The Holy Spirit empowers us so we can empower others. The key is a willingness to serve and be served.

3. THE FRUIT OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment produces the kind of love that is faithful, honorable and predicable. This is the kind of love that can sustain a relationship through all kinds of circumstances and all kinds of adversity. Empowerment also encourages a growing relationship in which there is both freedom and an authentic sense of belonging.

Margery Williams wrote *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It is the story of a toy rabbit who very much wanted to be real but did not know what "real" was:

"What is real?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

Through Jesus Christ we discover that God REALLY loves us and has loved us for a long, long time, and so we become Real.

CONCLUSION

In this season of preparation and change, examine your relationships with others. The secular understanding of power in relationships is to try to decrease the power of the other person in order to try to control them. If this describes you, then let this season be an opportunity to give up the control ... to pledge instead to empower ... to help others become everything they can possibly become.

Consider choosing one person this new year whom you especially want to help. Empower that person to become more of what God intended him or her to be. Through prayer ask the Spirit of God to use you to bring Christ to that person. We can do no greater giving this season than to share with others the message of Christ. In so doing, we empower them with the very power of our loving God!