
The Promise of Power

A sermon on Acts 1:6-26 by Coty Pinckney |
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Do you ever dream that you're in school, sitting down to take a test, and realize, "I never studied! I never even went to class!"

Or perhaps you dream that you are about to begin an athletic event – and realize you never practiced.

How do those dreams make you feel? Do you feel that way when you are called upon to be a witness to Jesus? Do you think, "I don't know enough! I need years of study to properly witness! I can't possibly make these people listen!"

Last week we began our series in the book of Acts. We saw that this book is not really the Acts of the Apostles. Only two apostles are prominent, but it is not a synopsis of their lives either. Instead, Luke opens by saying that his first volume, his gospel "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach." Acts then deals with what Jesus *continued* to do. Acts tells of the continuing work of Jesus.

We saw last week that:

1) Jesus assigns the apostles a task: "Speak of what you know! Be witnesses to the truths you have seen! Proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins! And take this message to all nations!"

2) Jesus also promises the power to accomplish the task through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of what He calls the "promise of the Father." We looked at three Old Testament prophecies that Jesus might have been referring to:

- From Joel: God promises that He will pour out His Spirit on *all* flesh. This distinguishes the promised future event from the way His Spirit worked in Old Testament times, falling on a subset of the people, particularly leaders who must fulfill a great task.
- From Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36: All God's people have a *new heart* of flesh, *God's Law* is written on their hearts. And Paul notes that this is fulfilled in his day: he tells the Colossians that they have Christ in them.

So Jesus assigns a task, and promises His apostles the power to fulfill the task. Then the rest of the book of Acts shows God at work, saving, sending, and judging – even working sovereignly through the evil acts of evil men. The result: The Word of God increases and prevails mightily.

This morning: We'll look more closely at those to whom Jesus assigns this task. Jesus speaks here to His remaining eleven apostles after the death of Judas. What are they like? What do we know about these apostles? Are they great men, highly accomplished?

No. If anyone had nominated one of them for a position on the Jewish ruling council, the response would have been: "He is unqualified! He is inexperienced! He doesn't have enough education! Furthermore, he's not from Jerusalem – he's just from some rural backwater!"

That response would result in part from prejudice against those from Galilee. But even seen through our generally sympathetic eyes, there is not much to commend these men. Indeed, Scripture *does not* present these apostles as great men. Yes, in the gospels they occasionally show tremendous insight. For example, Peter responds to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" by replying, "You are the Christ the Son of the Living God!" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then says Peter is blessed, for God the Father revealed that central truth to him. God gave Peter tremendous insight into the most important truth of all.

But lest we think highly of Peter, in that same passage he shows tremendous stupidity. Jesus predicts His suffering and death – and Peter rebukes Him. Jesus says He will die – then Peter says, "This shall never happen to you!" (Acts 16:22)

These are the people Jesus has to work with. These are the people to whom Jesus assigns His task. What hope is there for that task to be fulfilled?

In today's passage, Luke highlights both the limitations and the potential of these men. We'll look this morning under 3 headings:

- Weakness and Ignorance
- Sufficient Knowledge
- Overwhelming Power

Much of what I will say about the apostles applies directly to you and me. We too are weak and ignorant. But we too have sufficient knowledge – yes, even the brand new Christian – and we too have access to overwhelming power. So listen – and then fulfill the task.

Weakness and Ignorance

Consider how much weakness and ignorance these 11 apostles showed just in the previous two months:

- Peter denied Jesus three times – to servant girl.
- **All** scattered and ran when Jesus was arrested.
- After the crucifixion, they were hiding behind locked doors out of fear (John 20:19).
- Jesus Himself calls the larger group of His followers, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25)
- And then there's Thomas: After being told that the risen Christ had appeared to the other disciples, he said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (John 20:25).

These are not exactly strong qualifications for leadership.

But even from here on out in Acts, we see the humanness, the fallenness of these men:

- Acts 15: Barnabas and Paul disagree sharply about whether to take John Mark with them on their missionary journey, since he abandoned them during the previous one. They actually split over this disagreement.
- Acts 16:7 In this curious verse, Paul attempts to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. Whatever it means, Paul was trying to do something God did not want him to do

So there is not much to commend these eleven apostles.

Today's text adds to our reasons for doubt about their qualifications. Here, they display three weaknesses:

A Fundamental Misunderstanding

Acts 1:6 when [the apostles] had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus has just promised that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The apostles know the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Spirit, including those we looked at last week. They know that in Joel, just four verses after God says He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh, He says "I will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem" (Joel 3:1).

So at the level of interpreting the text of Joel, theirs is a good question. The book of Joel – and other Old Testament Scriptures – speak of the coming of the Spirit and the restoration of the kingdom together.

But given all that Jesus has said to them, all that Jesus has taught them, and even given other Old Testament prophecies, the question highlights their weakness: They haven't really been taking to heart what Jesus has said.

If Jesus is to restore kingdom *now*, many questions arise:

- When are all men going to hate the disciples (Mark 13:13)?
- When are they be persecuted for His sake (Luke 21:12)?
- When is the Gospel going to be preached as a testimony to all the nations (Matthew 24:14)?

The question displays a fundamental misunderstanding of what God is doing at that time. The Eleven do not here understand their calling, and will not apart from Holy Spirit working in them. They desperately need the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus tells them:

"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority." (Acts 1:7)

That is, "It's better for you not to know."

Kids: How do you feel when you ask your parents a question, and they reply, "You'll understand that when you're a little older." Doesn't part of you think, "I'm old enough! I can know NOW!" Yet there are things that we cannot comprehend until we reach greater maturity.

That is what Jesus is saying here: "There are things you need to know, and things you don't need to know. You don't need to know the timing of the restoration of the Kingdom. You do need to believe it will happen. Your role is not to have secret knowledge of God; don't desire that. Don't think of yourself as particularly wise or insightful. You don't know many things. That's fine. Indeed, that's good. Focus on what you *do* know, and communicate *that*."

So the first weakness of the apostles is a fundamental misunderstanding of their role in God's plan.

A Diversion from the Task

We see the second weakness in verse 10. Jesus ascends into heaven. Then what do the disciples do? They stand around, gazing into heaven.

The angels ask:

"Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

Do you hear the rebuke in those words? The angels are saying, "You've been given a task. Your task is not to speculate about when Jesus will return. Your task is not to think back nostalgically about the time Jesus spent with you. Your task is not to focus on the privilege of being present at the ascension. Until Jesus returns – He has work for you! Do it!"

Indeed, Jesus has told them in Luke 12 that those servants are blessed whom their Lord finds doing His work when He returns. They need to apply themselves to the task.

Getting Ahead of God

We see the third weakness in the story about finding a replacement for Judas, verses 15-26.

This story shows both positive and negative aspects of the apostles. Note that my interpretation is somewhat controversial – a number of commentators don't find anything wrong with the actions that Peter takes. So consider what I say, and search the Scriptures to see if these things are true.

Jesus has told apostles not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father – that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

They don't depart. They meet together with other believers – including Mary (and, by the way, this is the last reference to Mary in the Scriptures). While they meet, they pray.

In addition to the excitement they feel about Jesus' resurrection, and ascension, they experience pain associated with Judas. Remember, Judas was their friend, their companion. They trusted him. No one suspected him. Judas betrayed Jesus – but he also betrayed THEM. As they meet together, few in number, they feel him missing.

Struggling with this, Peter does the right thing: he searches the Scripture. He finds that David himself had been betrayed, and that those betrayals foreshadow Judas' acts.

This is a comfort to Peter, as he sees that all that Judas did was part of God's plan. So he preaches on this topic from Psalms 69 and 109 to the gathered followers. This was good, right, and proper.

Peter also sees in Scripture that the office of the betrayer should be filled with someone else. He applies this to the present situation. Once again, he is right.

But gets the method and the timing wrong.

The Holy Spirit is coming. The apostles ill be filled with power from on high. And *God* will fill the role of Judas by a method and in a time and place of His choosing. Peter, instead, chooses the wrong method and time.

Method: There is no need for the apostles to cast lots. They are reverting to a method used in ancient Israel for discerning God's will. But the New Covenant is about to arrive! They will all know the Lord, from the least to the greatest (Jeremiah 31:34). Never again will lots be used in Scripture.

Timing: Years later, when Jesus appears to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul becomes the apostle "abnormally born" (1 Corinthians 15:8 NIV). Thus, in a book that focuses on God reaching the nations, the apostle God chooses to replace Judas is the apostle *to the nations*.

So the apostles once again display a weakness: Getting ahead of God. They do not understand where they are in redemptive history; they don't understand the importance of the coming of the New Covenant, the centrality of their new relationship to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, they don't understand their task.

So the apostles are weak and ignorant.

Is the task hopeless then? Does Jesus just need to get rid of these guys, and come up with others who will be better qualified, more competent?

No. These are the men Jesus has chosen. They WILL accomplish His task.

How will they do this, when they are weak and ignorant?

Sufficient Knowledge

They are ignorant, yes. There are indeed many things they don't know.

But they have *sufficient knowledge* to spread joy in Christ.

Remember the threefold purpose of the church:

- To express joy in Christ: Worship
- To deepen joy in Christ: Discipleship.

These first two continue for all eternity. The third purpose, however, is fulfilled in this age:

- To spread joy in Christ

So what does Jesus tell them? Remember, He told them initially to remain in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power. But He says in verse 8:

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Luke 24:47 is even more explicit: They must preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations.

They don't have tremendous knowledge. But they do know what is most important:

- They do know that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the Son of the living God.
- They do know Jesus lived a perfect life.
- They do know what Jesus taught.
- They do know Jesus died on the cross, according to God's plan, taking on Himself the penalty for all the sins of those who would believe in Him.
- They do know Jesus rose from dead, according to God's plan.
- They do know Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father the Almighty.
- They do know Jesus is coming again, just like He left them, according to God's plan.

They don't have special insight. They don't know all they would like to know. They can't answer every question.

But they are witnesses. They know *Jesus*. And they *will be* His witnesses,

- Not only in this city of Jerusalem, but in their entire nation
- Not only in their nation but among the surrounding peoples who despise them
- Not only among those who are nearby, but to the very ends of the earth

They are weak and ignorant – yet they have sufficient knowledge to fulfill their task.

Overwhelming Power

Consider again the extent of the task God gives these weak, ignorant apostles: They are to take the message of salvation and joy through Jesus to the end of the earth.

What does He mean by “end of the earth”?

Jesus is alluding here to Isaiah 49:6. Paul will later allude to this same verse in a sermon (Acts 13:47). The verse in Isaiah concerns the coming Servant, Jesus Himself:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

The “end of the earth” surely includes the concept of *geographic distance* – the disciples are to go to all *places* where people live. But there is an even stronger emphasis on *cultural distance*. For the Scripture says He will be a “light to the nations.” The word “nations” refers not to “political entities,” but to peoples, people groups, cultural entities.

In Acts 13:47, Paul makes this explicit: Since the Jews have rejected his teaching, he is going to the non-Jews. He then remains in the same geographic area, but takes the message of the Gospel to the other nations, the other ethnicities around him.

How in the world is God going to use Jewish fishermen and tax collectors to reach all the nations? Simply to travel will be difficult. But then how will they communicate the Gospel:

- To malicious, death-threatening Jewish leaders?
- To hateful Samaritans?
- To pompous, oppressive Romans?
- To intellectual, philosophical Greeks?
- To wild, unpredictable barbarian tribes?

Can these weak, ignorant apostles do that?

Yes.

The task is impossible – apart from God's power. So God promises overwhelming power: The power to change enemies. The power to replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. His power. Power that He then displays in Acts chapter 2: An overwhelming power that, when He chooses, *no one* can resist.

Lessons for Us Today

1) Acknowledge our weakness before men

We are still weak. We are still ignorant of so much – to some extent because of our own fault, in that we too are “slow of heart to believe all the Scriptures have spoken”, and to some extent because still it is not good for us to know all things.

You do not have to pretend you have an answer to every question – because you don't! That's not necessary. Be willing to admit your weakness and ignorance.

2) Acknowledge our weakness before God

- We cannot reach the nations apart from His power.
- We cannot build the church apart from His power.
- We cannot live Christian lives apart from His power.

Now, we *can* do some things on our own:

- We can organize people to go throughout the world, doing good deeds.
- We can build large organizations that have “church” in their names.
- We can live lives that look good to those around us, and thus gain the admiration of others.

But we *cannot* spread joy in Christ, deepen joy in Christ, or express joy in Christ apart from God's power. We *must be* on our faces, pleading with God for power, acknowledging our weakness, acknowledging our sinfulness, our *daily* need to appropriate the cross, our *daily* need for forgiveness by the blood of Jesus.

We are responsible, yes, to study, to learn, to strategize about how best to fulfill the task.

But God will glorify Himself among the nations through His *weak* followers. He will be glorified in the *result*, and He will be glorified in the *means*, as weak followers go out in conscious, active dependence upon Him.

3) Proclaim what we know is true

We proclaim the Gospel. And the Gospel fundamentally is a simple message.

There is a place for scholarship. There is a place for deep study.

But we are *all* called to be witnesses. Speaking the Gospel is not only for experts, not only for those with doctorates in New

Testament theology or apologetics. We *all* have sufficient knowledge of this simple message to glorify God through proclamation.

4) *Trust His great power toward us who believe*

We are weak, but He is mighty.

On our own, we can do nothing, but by His power, we can do all things.

He will work through our failures and in spite of our successes.

He will work to bring His Gospel to every nation.

He will give His church, His ambassadors, the words and the strategy to complete the missionary task.

We go in personal weakness.

We go with much ignorance.

We go with considerable sinfulness.

This is true whether we go to our neighbor or to another continent.

But our God is mighty to save.

He breaks down barriers. He overthrows kingdoms

And *He* will bring *all the nations, all the peoples* to Himself – through people just like you and me.

Indeed – through you and me.

So trust His power. Know He is at work.

Be His witness – to the end of the earth.

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