

Where Does Power Come From?

You've heard about people who wasted their youth?

Well, now you know someone who not only wasted his youth, but wasted part of his middle age as well. When I hit 26 and hadn't accomplished much of anything, my mother called me a "late bloomer." When I hit 30 with the same track record, my father called me a disappointment. When I turned 34 it became clear even to me that it was time for me to get serious about life and find a career. Not being employed, I had plenty of time to figure out what kind of a career appealed to me. I thought I might be good at sales, so I got a job at the Yinneman/Dorsch Ford Agency in Green Bay, Wisconsin, selling cars. Make that, "trying" to sell cars. I was an even bigger disappointment to Yinneman/Dorsch than I had been to my father. I considered it a success if I got along well with a customer, had a few laughs and wished him well. My employer had a different idea of success. So, after a few months we bid each other adieu and I commenced a new search for a career. By the grace of God I got a job in management at a small manufacturing company in Milwaukee. I liked the work and did pretty well at it and so I left the sales world behind.

I do remember one thing from my brief time at Yinneman/Dorsch, however, and it was a series of training films we had to watch which featured a man who claimed to be the world's most successful car salesman: the famous (or infamous) Joe Girardi. Joe Girardi knew every conceivable trick there was to selling a car, and in this training film he demonstrated them. Some of them would make you wince. Some of them made even seasoned car salesmen wince. One that I happen to remember was that he would deliberately knock the pen off his desk onto the floor so that his potential customer would pick it up. He figured that if the customer had the pen in his hand he would be more likely to sign the papers.

Joe had an interesting way of motivating himself. He hated to get up in the morning. So the first thing he would do after he woke up was to stomp into the bathroom, glare at himself in the mirror and say, "someone's gonna pay for getting me out of bed!" Joe was pure walking, talking determination. He ate, drank and breathed selling cars. His main purpose in life was to exert his willpower over every prospective customer who walked through the door. And he was pretty good at it. You might question his methods, but his results spoke for themselves: he made over \$200,000 a year in the nineteen sixties selling Fords. He was the classic American success story: a rugged individual who lifted himself up by his own bootstraps and made himself rich through hard work and sheer willpower. Joe Giardi had a lot of willpower, but the Bible suggests that there is a source of power that far exceeds human willpower. It's a power that comes only from God. To receive and use that power we have to do two things.

First, we have to face up to all our sins and weaknesses, confess them to God and ask him to forgive us. Second, we have to learn the art of *submitting*: submitting our will to God's will **and** submitting our interests to each other's interests. Now let's be honest: neither of these things appeal to us. First of all, we'd rather ignore our sins and weaknesses than confront them—let alone confess them to anyone. We know that we have them, but we'd just as soon let them lie.

Second, the idea of *submitting* is even worse. You don't see corporate vision statements talking about "submitting." Vince Lombardi didn't say, "submitting is the only thing." We don't want to **submit**, we want to **prevail**—in the court of human opinion and in God's opinion as well. The call to, "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" is a stumbling block to us because it inflicts a lethal wound to our pride. We won't want to think we need help from anyone—from our neighbor or from God. We'd far rather make it on our own steam than admit we need help.

We can see a good example of this in our children during their adolescence. Oh how they yearn to be out on their own! They want to flex their wills and "do it their way"—until, of course, they get in over their heads and then they turn to us to bail them out. And we "adults" are not all that different, are we? We prefer to do it on our own too—until, of course, we get in over our heads, and then we turn to God to bail us out. Sometimes I think we must appear to God like our adolescent children appear to us: wanting desperately to strike out on our own, yet having no idea what we're really letting ourselves in for. The truth of it is that we're rebels at heart and the worst of it is that we're proud of it. There is an ancient Greek legend about a giant named Prometheus who stole fire from the gods.

When the gods threatened to torture him for all eternity if he didn't give it back he defied them and accepted the punishment. We like to think we would be like that if we could. So when Paul speaks of "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" we are put off by his words because down deep we subscribe to the gospel of Prometheus—of the gospel of Joe Girardi—rather than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Weakness is wimpy and submission is passive, and neither are on our list of virtues. But would anyone call Paul a wimp or describe him as passive? Hardly. He started out his career as an up-and-coming young Pharisee. He had all the right credentials: he was brilliant and had studied under the most famous rabbi of his time—Rabbi Gamaliel. He had plenty of willpower and plenty of moxy. He was a man with a mission who was on the fast track to becoming part of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish ruling council which governed Israel. Paul was like a Harvard MBA with a "type a" personality moving up the ladder of a Wall Street investment firm. And he had just been given an assignment which would make it possible for him to throw the competition into complete turmoil.

Paul was living every ambitious young man's dream! He was the Joe Girardi of the New Testament. And then he gave it all up to go to work for a penniless carpenter from Nazareth who had recently been crucified. Now that's taking an alternate career path! Paul threw away raw executive power—the power of life or death over his fellow Jews—so that he could be flogged, stoned, placed in stocks, beaten, set upon by angry mobs and ultimately thrown into prison—all for the sake of a dead Jew. And he knew in advance that that was what he had bargained for because Jesus had said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." In worldly terms, his decision was incomprehensible. Paul would never be a candidate for an "employee of the year" award. More likely he'd be a candidate for the booby hatch.

But **was** Paul insane? Was he a wimp? I don't think so. Paul had discovered a source of power that was out of this world. A source which didn't vary with the ebb and flow of human events and career opportunities. Paul had confronted his sins and weaknesses, begged for forgiveness, and submitted his will to the will of God and his body and soul to Jesus Christ. Once he had done that, he began to think with Christ's mind and speak with Christ's words. He began to long for what Christ wanted, to love what Christ loved and to hate what Christ hated. He was no longer standing in his own strength; he was standing in the strength of the Lord. And with that power working in him and through him, he went out and changed the course of history. In the face of savage resistance and horrendous persecution, Paul established the Christian church in Asia Minor and Europe. And within three centuries, that church—also in the face of savage resistance and horrendous persecution—transformed the Roman Empire.

Now does this success story mean that Paul experienced no vexations, no troubles, no failures, no pain, no doubts along the way? Not at all. Not only did Paul have to deal with enemies who did everything within their power to derail him, he also had to deal with an enemy that lived within him. He had chosen God over Satan but that didn't mean that Satan left him alone. Sin raged in his flesh just as it does in our flesh and it often got the better of him. At one point he cried out: "I do not understand what I do, for the good that I would do I do not do, but the evil I hate—this I keep on doing! In my mind I serve the law of God but in my flesh I serve the law of sin. Wretched man that I am: who will save me from this body of death?" And then Paul answered his own question: "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul never forgot where his power came from—and where it didn't come from. It didn't come from his education. It didn't come from his willpower. It didn't come from the Jewish power structure. It didn't come from his eloquence or his skill in argumentation—both of which were considerable.

Paul's power came through his weakness.

Listen to how he describes it: "I will gladly boast about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." By confessing his weaknesses and sins and submitting his will to God's will, Paul became one of the most powerful men who ever lived. His feet were planted on the rock of ages and that enabled him to handle all the woes and miseries that were visited upon him in this vale of tears. Toward the end of his life he wrote: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength, for to me, to live is Christ; to die is gain." I don't know about you but I long to have that faith and that contentment—to know that I am a channel through which God's power and grace flow into the world. And I know that the more I discern and confess my sins and weaknesses and strive to submit my will to God's will, the more that can happen. And the same is true for you. Amen.