

THE SECRET OF JESUS

by Ray C. Stedman

In three verses in the fifth chapter of the gospel of John we have Jesus' own explanation for that incredible life which he lived among us. Studying through this passage this past week I felt like a little boy who was given a bucket and told to empty the Pacific Ocean before lunch! I have sat and stared at these verses and seen things in them that made me wonder how I could make clear the beauty, the profundity, and yet the simplicity of them.

In Verses 19 and 20 there is a truth far beyond Einstein's simple little formula, $E = m c^2$. Remember how thrilled and blessed you were when you discovered in school that $E = m c^2$? Whether you knew it or not, that formula, which Einstein came to after years of mathematical calculations and deep thinking about the processes of the universe, has changed the modern world. In its utter simplicity, that formula has proved to be the key that unlocked the world of nuclear power and introduced us into a whole new age in the history of mankind. It stands behind most of the technological achievements that startle us in our day. Yet it is as nothing compared with the profound utterances of Jesus here.

Let us have them before us. John 5:18-20:

This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God.

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel." {John 5:18-20 RSV}

These verses follow immediately the account of the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda, when Jesus simply said to him, "Rise, take up your bed, and walk," {John 5:8 RSV}. Immediately the man got to his feet, took up his bed, and walked! What a manifestation of the power of God! In the crowd which had gathered around the porches of the pool that day there must have been many who saw this miracle with open-mouthed amazement, staggered by what they saw. But there was a handful of men in the crowd, whom John simply calls, "the Jews" (he means the leaders of the Jews, some of the Orthodox priests, members of the ruling class of the Jews), who were not impressed. They looked on this occurrence with narrowed eyes, whispering their displeasure among themselves, angered by what Jesus had done.

Verse 18 discloses that they saw in Jesus a renegade who refused to obey the Sabbath regulations, and a blasphemer against God:

This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God. {John 5:18 RSV}

This verse represents the Jews' misunderstanding of Jesus. They had watched a weak, powerless invalid who had been sick for 38 years, suddenly stand on his feet and walk, behaving in a normal fashion, having been made whole. Their reaction to this was disgust; they were angered that Jesus had dared to violate the regulations that they had added to the Mosaic laws about the Sabbath. They were angry at One who would not conform to the status quo, to the conventional approach to life. They regarded him as a blasphemer because he dared to say things that made it sound as though he was equal with God. (By the way, this verse answers those who challenge the fact that Jesus made a claim to Godhood. Jesus clearly conveyed that claim to those who were listening to him on that day.)

In reply to that misunderstanding, Jesus explains himself. I do not think there is anything more magnificent in

the Word of God than this scene where Jesus confronts these hostile priests and explains to them in the simplest terms how he operates, yet he knew as he did it that they would twist and distort his words until at last they resulted in his death. This was a courageous act. It took power, perhaps as much power as did the healing of the impotent man. It is further confirmation of what our Lord indicates is the secret of his power. That is what he is talking about -- how he lived a life that was continually the point of release of the power of God in whatever he said or did.

Jesus begins by what I call *the formula of focused attention* : "Truly, truly, I say to you."

Whenever you read those words in the gospels, pay close attention to what follows. Those words have the same effect as the old-fashioned 19th century theater posters which had a hand with index finger pointing at certain words to highlight them. This is Jesus' way of inviting his hearers to listen to truth that is absolutely fundamental and basic: "Truly, truly, I say to you."

Now Jesus begins to unfold the secret. The first aspect of it is a recognition of the total folly of self-sufficiency: "the Son can do nothing of his own accord."

That is probably the most radical statement in the entire Word of God, because it indicates the first step in being a channel of the power of God: a recognition that any effort made to use God's power for one's own benefit will finally leave nothing but a hollow, empty feeling; it will never achieve anything. You may mount to the top of whatever heap you aspire to, and gain the admiration and attention of all the world, but if you have not found this secret your life will be unsatisfying and absolutely insipid to you, and of no use whatever to God. "The Son can do nothing of his own accord."

Jesus does not mean that it is physically impossible for him to do something apart from the Father, any more than it is physically impossible for us to do things apart from God. We can, and we do. And Jesus could have, too. Further on in this account he says that the Father has given him power to act "out of himself." Jesus could have created a whole universe over which he was God. He had the power to do so. But the whole point of this is, he chose never to exercise that power for his own benefit. Never! This is the explanation of his behavior in the wilderness when he was tempted by the devil to change stones into bread for his own satisfaction, to leap from the temple to gain the applause of people, or to gain the whole world for himself. He steadfastly refused to do so. That is the key. God gives his power to those who will not use it for their own benefit. That is one of the most profound secrets in Scripture. Jesus starts there: "The Son can do nothing."

The "can" is not one of physical, but of moral impossibility. I might say to some man of sterling integrity -- let's say, Steve Zeisler -- "Steve, why don't you pad your expense account this week and get an extra \$40 so we can take our wives out to dinner?" He would look at me with horror in his eyes, and say, "I can't do that." He could, of course, but he will not; that is the point. He could do that. He could cheat, lie, steal, whatever, all of us can, but it would violate his integrity; it would cheapen his whole life; it would be a total contradiction of all he believes in. That is what Jesus means when he says, "The Son can do nothing of his own accord." He could, but he would not, and he never did.

What he did do was obey an inner vision. He says,

" ... the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing;"
{John 5:19b RSV}

He is looking at God the Father with an inner vision, and, seeing what the heart of the Father wants to do in a situation, he immediately obeys that.

I do not know quite how to describe this inner vision. Within his Spirit, somehow, an impulse arose which Jesus knew was of the Father, because it was in line with the character of the Father as he has revealed himself in his Word.

Many people today claim that God has told them to do something or other. We even see accounts in the newspapers of men who have murdered, saying God told them to do so. Not long ago there was an account of

a man who murdered his wife and children, claiming that God had told him to do that. We must recognize that it is dangerous to follow just any impulse from within our minds and think that God is behind it.

The key, of course, is that no impulse ever arose in our Lord's mind that was not in line with the external revelation of the Word of God. That is the guideline. "Test everything" {1 Th 5:21 RSV} by the Scripture, we are told; what is in line with what the Scripture says God is like, that impulse can be safely followed. That is what our Lord did. In any given situation something within him indicated what the Father wanted done, and immediately our Lord responded to will to do that, to say the word, and his word had power.

We can see this principle at work in the incident at the pool of Bethesda. There was a great crowd of invalids lying there -- lame, blind and paralyzed -- and yet when our Lord's eyes fell on one man, just one man, he sensed within that here was a man whom the Father knew had reached the end of his rope, whom the Father understood was helpless and hopeless, ready to receive help and not to argue and fight, and, perhaps, need to experience further pain. The Samaritan who found the wounded man lying by the roadside sensed an impulse from within to help the man. That was the Father at work, stirring him, moving him to respond with compassion to a need he saw. That is the key -- that inner vision of what the Father wants done. Two religious persons had already passed by this wounded man. (Somebody has well said the reason they did not help him was that the man had already been robbed!) But when the Samaritan saw him, he sensed within him what God wanted done. At the pool of Bethesda when our Lord sensed within himself what God wanted done there was an immediate response. He said the word, "Rise," and the man was on his feet.

Notice how Jesus puts this: "the Son can do nothing of his own accord ('nothing from me'), but only what he sees the Father doing ('everything from God')." Does that sound familiar? Anybody who has read the writings of Paul will remember that in the third chapter of the great Second Letter to the Corinthians the apostle says something very similar: "This is the confidence we have in him, not as though there were anything coming from us, but everything coming from God. (Nothing from me, everything from God)," {cf, 2 Cor 3:4-6 RSV}. That, Paul declares, is the New Covenant, the new arrangement for life. On that basis the apostle did that mighty work that has changed the course of the history of the world in every generation since that day.

Here is the secret of the release of the power of God -- nothing coming from me, everything coming from God; nothing for or from me, but everything coming for the Father and from the Father. Thus, the amazing import of this verse is: This is what Jesus is modeling for us. We have the same relationship to him as the Son, as he had to the Father. What the Father would do through him, the Son is prepared to do through us.

I submit to you that is far greater in its impact than $E = mc^2$. Simple, yet absolutely profound -- releasing at any point of human need the power of God to meet that need. Our Lord lived like this all the time. It was not merely in raising men from sick beds that he employed the power of God. He did it when he spoke to some lonely, heartsick, broken person and brought him to life and faith. It was the same power that made his words full of impact and meaning to the woman at the well who had had five husbands and was still trying to find satisfaction in living with a man without marriage. Here is the secret of power, seen in the third element of this formula for action. When you begin with a self-denial -- "I cannot, I do not have anything in myself that can accomplish this thing, but God can, he wants it done" -- and you obey that, it results in a visible release of power. Jesus could say to the impotent man, "Stand up," and the man was immediately on his feet.

Words are remarkable things. Right now I am speaking words to you. What are they but little puffs of air and sound coming out of my mouth? Sometimes even millions of words have no impact, no power. We are moving into an election year. Think of all the words we are going to hear, pouring incessantly on our ears, with little power behind them. Yet words can have tremendous impact. Sometimes a single word can hit you in such a way it utterly changes your life from then on.

Last week I shared in a Navigators Pastors' Conference ministry in Colorado Springs, with Howard Hendricks and Chuck Swindoll. There were 300 pastors there from all over this nation, East Coast to West Coast, Canadian border to Mexico -- young men, just beginning their ministry. What an exciting time, to be in on the ground floor of setting the vision of their life and the reasons for their ministry! Chuck, Howard, and I were so excited by the prospect we were almost bouncing off the walls. On the second morning, Chuck

Swindoll said that, though he was scheduled to speak on a certain subject, as he had been listening, and watching, seeing God at work, he felt strangely moved to change his subject and instead to speak on forgiveness. In a marvelous message, grounded in his own experience, he shared with us the necessity for every relationship of life to be based upon forgiveness -- forgiving one another, not being hard and demanding, or asking for our pound of flesh, but forgiving one another. It was obvious that his was a word of power; it touched us and blessed us. There was a fragrant spirit that spread throughout the whole of the congress as that word of power came. He had inwardly sensed (seen) what the Lord wanted, and, when he complied, his word came with power.

Words are like sails on sailboats. If you go out in a sailboat on the bay on a still day and raise the sail it will hang there, limp and powerless; the boat will just sit there, becalmed. But lift that sail on a day when a strong breeze is blowing and it will fill with wind; it will begin to strain and pull and the boat will move rapidly through the water. Any sailboat will (especially if it is made in Australia)! That is what a word is like. Words are insignificant in themselves, but if they are in line with the working of God they are filled with impact and power. This is what our Lord is modeling for us.

Our Lord gives further insight in Verse 20:

"For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel." {John 5:20 RSV}

Jesus will go on to detail later in the chapter two of those "greater works" that are amazing and marvelous. Here he gives further revelation of what is behind this divine process of power.

First, it flows out of the Father's love for the Son. The "Father" whom Jesus is talking about is the Creator, the One whose brilliant mind conceived the glory of nature, all the marvelous structures of life, the intricate blending and dovetailing together of the processes of the natural world. That creative Person "loves" the Son and delights to communicate to him, in any given situation, a novel, creative alternative to the things that would destroy, hurt, maim, and create sorrow.

So it is with our relationship with the Son. He is the Lord of life, the Lord of nature, the Lord of the universe, the Lord of nations, and he loves us. It is his delight to communicate to us creative alternatives to the situations in which we find ourselves. This does not mean we are to be gilt-edged spooks, with wings making a holy hum, half-angel and half-human. We are normal human beings who have access to a power, a wisdom, a creative mind who can suggest new approaches that seem simple in themselves, but, filled with the divine wind, are like great sails that change the course and move the events of history. This is greater by far than $E = m c^2$.

Then the second step: This process is to be without limit -- "For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing." The whole thing -- not all at once, but ultimately it will include everything. The writer of Hebrews says, "We do not yet see everything in subjection to him [man]. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor ..." {Heb 2:8b-9a RSV}. We see Jesus crowned; eventually that is the end of all God wants to show him.

As I suggested, the next line says this is going to be a gradual revelation: "greater works than these will he show him." That is, it is a graduated process. Jesus the Man is growing in his understanding and strength, and, as he does, he will participate more and more in the works of the Father until he can say, "I have finished the work which Thou hast given me to do," {cf, John 17:4}.

This is the process he is teaching us: God's power is not handed to us as a package deal that we can use for our own benefit and make a name for ourselves. If we think it is, we will discover that, though we may win the applause of many, we will remain hollow and empty in our hearts. God's power is released only when we use it as the Son did -- for the glory of God, for the doing of the Father's will at any given moment. When that happens, he gives us more power; we grow in our ability to manifest the power of God. That is why a life that walks with God becomes more beautiful, more free, more real as it grows. Life becomes richer and fuller,

even though it may be lived amidst hostile opposition, as in our Lord's case here. This is a pattern for us. God wants to teach us this very thing.

Finally, the third step: "... these he will show him, that you may marvel." Every manifestation of the Father's power (or the Son's power released in us), will awaken a sense of wonder on the part of those observing. A simple word, perhaps, a deed of compassion, a cup of cold water given to somebody in the name of the Lord, will leave an impact that will make people marvel.

At Glen Eyrie last week, my wife and I walked up the mountain trail that leads to the grave of Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators. The grave looks out over beautiful Glen Eyrie, with its great castle that is the headquarters of the Navigators. As we were standing there looking down at the grave, we talked of our remembrances of Dawson. I was associated with him in Hawaii in the early days of the Navigators' work in World War II, while Elaine was his secretary for a time in Los Angeles. Little incidents about Dawson came to mind as we remembered those days.

One of the young pastors at the conference came walking up the trail and joined us as we were looking at the grave. He asked us if we had known Dawson, and we told him, "Yes, we had." He said he had never met him, but he had read some of his books. "I have to say," this young pastor continued, "that Dawson Trotman changed my life. He has had a tremendous impact on me." When Dawson was 50 years old he was drowned in a boating accident in New York State while attempting to save the life of a girl who could not swim. On his grave are written the words, "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends." This young pastor said to my wife and me, "Would you pray that God would give me something of the spirit of Dawson Trotman; that spirit that had such a vast vision of the lostness and need of the world, and such a hunger to reach people with the delivering word of the Living God." As we three stood there, I prayed that God would indeed do that for this young man. I thought of the great work of the Navigators that has now reached around the world. In almost every country Navigators are discipling men and women, teaching them how to live as God intended men and women to live. What an impact that one life has had! We rightly marvel at what God did through him.

There is a verse in Romans 8 that follows a verse we often quote. We all know Romans 8:28, that wonderful verse that steadies us in times of trial, "All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." But the next verse says, "Whom he has predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he (the Son) might be the first born among many brethren," {cf, Rom 8:29 RSV}. God is not content with having only one Son. He wants many sons. Hebrews says (he has done all this) "that he might lead many sons to glory," {cf, Heb 2:10}. Sons is a generic term: it includes men and women. God did all this so that he might have many children who are like his Son. He has "predestined" us, i.e., he is intent on it, he will not fail, he is at work on it.

The processes of change are now happening in your life and mine in order to teach us this very formula of behavior -- that we refuse to use God's power for our benefit (he will take care of that), and willingly respond to the inner impulse of compassion, mercy or love that we feel within us in any given situation; thus we will learn to operate by the mighty power of God, the mightiest power in the universe -- that we might be like his Son!

When you think that one day you are going to be, by God's grace and power, conformed to the image of his Son, you are left with one question: how much change are you in for in the days ahead? How much change am I in for? God is going to change us, and change is painful. We want to be left alone in our comfort. We do not like to be prodded and jabbed and made to think about things we do not want to think about. But God is going to change us, and the change will be that we might learn how to function according to the power of the Living God; how our words can have impact that will fall, not only on the ears of those who hear us, but perhaps for generation upon generation after we have left this earth, and our lives will have eternal significance.

Is that what you want?

I am sure you do want that. I have never met anybody who does not have a hunger for life.

This is what our Lord has modeled for us. He did it perfectly. Yet God in his grace has made provision that, as imperfectly as we do it, nevertheless we can learn to grow as his power is gradually granted to us that we might leave an impact behind us.

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