

## LOVE THAT EMPOWERS

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Series: **LOVEFIRST**  
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Love, Empowerment  
John 2:13-22

A couple of years ago, I was nearly banned from prison. It started out innocently enough. Some friends of mine invited me to come speak one Saturday night at the Texas State Prison not too far from where I lived. It was an intense, life-changing experience. A group of us carpoled to the prison, we went through the double-lock doors into the prison yard, then on into the building. We were subjected to searches of our equipment and of our person, then we set up some gear in a large hall, where the band would play and I would speak.

Once things were set up, we had a chance to go down to the dorm where we met dozens of men and got to hear some of their stories. Now, this wasn't some minimum security thing with a bunch of guys who moved decimal points on their corporate financials. We were surrounded by men who had been convicted of drug charges, sexual assault, and even murder. These were the guys your parents taught you to stay away from, and yet, I was drawn to them...and to their stories.

Later that evening, as I watched about 100 guys, all dressed in white, worshipping Jesus with reckless abandon, it was hard to fathom what had brought them to this place. Several of them told me that if it wasn't for prison, they would either be dead or would have hurt more people. They told me about discovering a loving God in the midst of their confinement. Many of them had seen radical transformation in their own lives, and were now helping others to find the same kind of transformation through Jesus.

After the band stopped playing, it was my turn. I stood up in front of those 100 rapists and murderers and drug dealers, and I talked about Jesus' command to love your neighbor. I talked about the injustice many of them felt had been done to them - by the justice system, by their parents, or by others who had done harm to them along the way. I told them that, regardless of our circumstances, Jesus doesn't let any of us off the hook when it comes to loving others.

I talked about how Jesus had compassion even on the Roman soldiers who beat him, tortured him, and ultimately killed him. How can we suggest that there should be any limit to our own love of others. I talked about the guards in that prison. They were hated by most of the inmates, and yet, Jesus' instruction was to love. I left them that day with a simple instruction: Love your neighbor...and start by loving the guards in this prison.

I walked out of that place riding high. It was an incredible experience for me and the other guys who were with me, and I felt good about having challenged that group of inmates to do something that, though difficult, would lead them ever-closer to Jesus.

A couple of days later, I got a call from my friend Ken - the guy who had invited me to speak at the prison. He said, "Hey Adam, is there any way you could send me your notes from Saturday night?"

I said, "Sure! No problem."

Ken said, "Well, actually, there is a problem. Some of the guards overheard your talk, and they complained to the Warden, and now he's wanting to have you *banned from every prison in the state of Texas.*"

And I'm like, "What did I do? What did I say that made them so mad?"

Ken said, "Well, they didn't like the way you were talking about the interaction between the prisoners and the guards."

"You mean the part where I told them to love the guards like Jesus loves us?"

"Yeah, they didn't hear it that way. They seemed to think you were highlighting the division between the inmates and guards and challenging their authority."

The conversation went on, but honestly, I don't remember what was said, because I was too busy churning on the ludicrousness of this complaint. I had instructed the prisoners to love the guards - to treat them with utmost respect - and what the guards heard was me inciting some kind of riot. I remember thinking, "This must be kind of how Jesus felt when he was being accused of things." Something got lost in translation!

So, anyway, I sent over my notes to Ken. He had a long talk with the Chaplain at the prison, who completely understood the point I was making and thought it was a good one, but warned that the politics inside the prison system might blow up in our face - that he might not be able to do much for us.

The back and forth between the Warden, the Chaplain, Ken and me went on for about a week. And ultimately, the Warden was satisfied that I hadn't been trying to start a prison riot (what non-prisoner would actually want to do that from *inside* the prison), and I didn't end up getting banned from Texas State Prisons, although I'm pretty sure my name's on a list somewhere.

And as I tried to unpack and decipher just what went on that Saturday night, I realized something. The guards who had a problem with what I was saying - and it was only 2 or 3 of them - they didn't hear what I actually said. Instead, what they heard, or rather, what they sensed, was a little tip in the balance of power. These guys who were used to having ultimate authority within the confines of that prison somehow sensed that there was a threat to that authority - not by some kind of violent uprising, but by a revolution of love.

By insisting on loving the guards, rather than battling against them, these inmates could effectively disarm their captors. It's incredibly hard to pick a fight when the other guy doesn't fight back. It's hard to have a shouting match when the other guy stays silent. And these guards understood, perhaps subconsciously, that the love of God is far more powerful than harsh words and the thump of a nightstick.

They took issue with what I said because it empowered these prisoners, which they saw as a threat to their authority.

Today, as we continue our series called **LOVEFIRST**, I want to look at God's Love That Empowers, and I want to do so by examining one of the most intriguing stories about Jesus that we find in the bible - one about an angry Jesus.

But first, I want to pray and ask God to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

### **Prayer**

The first time I ever heard the word empowerment, I was in my early twenties. I'm still not sure if I was just that sheltered or if, perhaps, the word itself sort of became en vogue around that time.

I was visiting a local church pastored by a friend of mine, and before things kicked off, they had some slides showing on the video screen. And on these slides were what they called their "5 Es" which represented the core values of the church. And I don't remember all the Es, but I do remember that one of them was "Empower". And I looked at the slide and thought, "I have no idea what that means."

Thinking back on it now, I'm kind of embarrassed to admit that not only did I not *know* what it meant, I did even have an educated *guess* as to what it meant. Of course, I eventually looked up the word and discovered that to "empower" simply meant "to give power to, or to give authority to." Today, it seems like the word "empower," and its cousin, "empowerment" are everywhere, especially here in Kenya. But have you ever considered the biblical manifestation of empowerment?

What does it look like when *God* empowers people?

For me, once I figured out what empowerment was, I began seeing it all throughout the bible. I would read familiar portions of scripture, and find myself saying, “God did it again. He empowered this person to do incredible things.”

In just the past few weeks here at Trinity, we’ve talked about some of these stories of empowerment. We talked about King David, a guy who started out as just a shepherd boy, but was empowered by God to become a hero of the people and ultimately a king. We talked about Jesus, at his weakest point, defeating temptation and, in a way, empowering the rest of us to know that we can do the same.

We talked last week about these guys Moses and Elijah who were empowered by God to do incredible things. We even discussed, within the overarching story of the bible - the meta-narrative of scripture - the fact that God plucked a guy named Abram out of obscurity and empowered not only him, but his descendants - that they would become a mighty nation, and that ultimately, the Savior of the world would be born of their people.

You see, as we look throughout the bible, we see God - the ultimate power broker - the ultimate authority - we see him empowering people - giving power and authority, sometimes to otherwise very powerless and weak people, in order for them to accomplish great things for the Kingdom of God. God *loves* to empower us. And God’s *love* is what empowers us.

There’s this great story in the bible. We actually find the story in all four of what we call the gospels - these four books about the life of Jesus - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And I can see why. It’s a fascinating story that was almost certainly told often around the campfire in the first century church. I’ll read the story from the book of John, chapter 2, starting in verse 13:

*When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”*

*The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”*

*Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”*

*They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the*

*dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.*

*John 2:13-22*

Now, this is a side of Jesus we don't talk about very often. I mean, I know there are churches you can go to and learn about an angry God - you know, those churches where they yell at you and tell you God is out to get you and you're going to hell. But not many people really talk about *Jesus* as being angry. I mean, the guy is called the *Prince of Peace*. You don't get that kind of a nickname by yelling at people all the time.

So, I have to think that this kind of behavior - using a whip to drive away animals, overturning tables, and yelling at people - that kind of behavior must not have been normal for Jesus. Something really got under his skin. And it got under his skin in this particular place - the temple - at this particular time - around the time of the Jewish Passover festival.

And so, you have to ask yourself what's going on here. What was Jesus so upset about? And just as importantly, what was he *doing*? I mean, I know that as Jesus walked around town in Jerusalem, there was plenty he could have been mad about. I mean, he was the perfect man - following God 100% with every aspect of his life. Surely, when he looked at the city around him, he was horrified at some of the things he saw, and yet, his anger manifests in this fit of rage *now*.

So what was Jesus doing? If you've read much about Jesus, you know that he was actually very calculated with his actions. Jesus wasn't the kind of guy to just fly off the handle. So, if he got all riled up in the temple, he did so for a reason. What was that reason?

Well, I'm talking about empowerment today, so you can probably guess that's part of it. But before we get to that, let's talk about the thing that's probably easiest to see, and that is the opposite of empowerment. It's disempowerment. You see, within the temple system, there were certain people who held a lot of power. And that was OK in a way, because that's how the system had been set up.

But these guys, because they were human, and because we humans tend to get drunk with power, had abused their power and authority. You see, when this little pseudo-market was set up in the temple courts, it was a money-making venture for both the operators of the market, and for the priests who ran the temple. Not unlike some places you might go today, the priests were getting a little cut of whatever the merchants and money-changers made.

It was a good little entrepreneurial effort, but Jesus doesn't seem to like the business model. So, he goes through this big display of overturning tables and driving out animals as a way of saying to the temple priests, "Who do you think you are? You've been given authority and

you've abused it. Now, I'm going to upset your system!" He was disempowering these guys because they were abusing their power.

And like the guards in that prison in Texas, these Jewish leaders felt threatened by Jesus. They really weren't keen on the idea that the balance of power might be tilted away from them. Look at their response in verse 18:

*The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your **authority** to do all this?"*

*John 2:18*

You see, Jesus was flipping over tables and making a scene, and the Jewish leaders started asking him about authority...about power. They saw *themselves* as being in charge of the temple, and they wanted to know just who Jesus thought he was to usurp their authority. For these guys who were clinging to their authority and abusing their power, Jesus represented a real threat. His actions were disempowering to them, and more frighteningly, they were empowering to some other people.

For example, through his actions in the temple court that day, Jesus was empowering a group of people that the religious leaders really didn't like - the Gentiles. You see, the place where this little market was set up was a place called the Court of the Gentiles. This was where people who weren't of Jewish descent, but still wanted to worship the God of Israel, could come and worship. It was the only place in the temple they could go to worship.

And so, when the money-changers and animal sellers set up in the Court of the Gentiles, they made it pretty difficult for Gentiles to actually worship there. I mean, imagine if somebody came into this tent and set up, like, an MPESA kiosk and a corral for a couple of cows and a cage with chickens in it. It would start to get crowded really fast...and noisy...and smelly. It just generally wouldn't really create the kind of atmosphere conducive to worshipping God, would it?

But that's what was going on here. These power-hungry, ego-driven temple leaders saw no value in non-Jewish people. So, they just repurposed the Court of the Gentiles for their own benefit.

But Jesus wouldn't have any of that. What Jesus knew is that the Kingdom of God, the love of God, the grace of God didn't belong exclusively to the Jews. You see, that was the common belief of the time. The Jews were the chosen people, and everybody else could go to hell...quite literally. But Jesus knew that wasn't how things were going to go. The Jews were the chosen people, yes, but what they were chosen *for* was not to be pampered brats. They were chosen to introduce the Savior *of* the world *to* the world. And the Gentile world

would ultimately end up embracing this truth much more rapidly and in larger numbers than the Jews.

So, when Jesus is going through flipping over tables and driving out animals with whips, we should be mindful of what he was leaving behind in that void. He was leaving behind the Court of the Gentiles - now rid of skeezy businessmen and smelly animals. Now, once again, prepared as a place of worship.

In his act of defiance against the temple leadership, Jesus was empowering those Gentiles who were determined to come to the temple to worship God, even though they weren't really wanted there. These were people who were devoted to God, but not really welcomed in the temple - which at the time was believed to be the house of God - the place where God dwells.

And Jesus does two things here. Not only does he clear out their worship space so these Gentiles can actually worship God there. He also sort of redefines God's dwelling place. In verse 19, he answers the Jewish leaders.

*"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."*

*They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body.*

*John 2:19-21*

These Jewish leaders were really confused by Jesus. They asked him for a sign to show his authority, and he said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They heard, "Destroy this temple that's surrounding us - this building." But what he was saying was, "Destroy *this* temple - destroy *me* - and I'll be back in three days." This was in reference to what would eventually happen to him. These same temple leaders were the ones who would later have him arrested and killed. Then, three days later, he would be back, walking around Jerusalem once again.

But there's something else going on here. Something perhaps even more important than Jesus' resurrection. When Jesus speaks of his body as a temple, he is realigning theology. You know, theology is the study of God - who God is, what he does, why he does it - and Jesus is realigning that and saying, "God doesn't reside in the temple. God is within us. God is among us." He was saying to these priests, "You don't have exclusive access to God." And at the same time, he was saying to these Gentiles, "You have *full* access to God." This was a huge shift!

Imagine yourself as a Gentile. You are always on the outside looking in when it comes to Jerusalem and the temple. You're a powerless group of people. You can't even go all the way into the temple to worship like other people can.

And along comes Jesus to say, “I’ll tell you what. Let’s just bring God out here to where you are.” All of a sudden the Gentiles go from not really having access to God to, now, all of a sudden, they have *full* access. Talk about empowerment! This disenfranchised group suddenly became empowered to explore a real relationship with the living God!

There was another group of people Jesus empowered during that moment, and one that he would consistently empower throughout his adult life - the poor.

You see, the market that was set up there in the temple - with the livestock and money-changers - served a very valid purpose. Actually, the types of services offered there were vital to the worship of the people, especially those coming from far away.

We read here that it was the time of the Passover, one of the biggest religious festivals of the year. And people from all over the known world would trek to Jerusalem to make sacrifices and to worship. But if you were coming from far off, you faced some challenges - especially if you were poor.

Imagine that you set off from your home - some far off place - and you are bringing along your prized lamb - the one that’s perfect, without defect, without blemish. This is going to be your sacrifice to God. But because you’re poor, you don’t have a bunch of people going with you. You don’t have guards or even shepherds to protect that lamb. Any number of things could happen. A band of thugs could jump you and steal the lamb. A wild animal could attack you and kill or injure the lamb. Or maybe the lamb just somehow gets nicked up on the journey and suddenly is no longer a spotless, blemish-free sacrifice. A lot of things could happen on a long journey to Jerusalem, and the poor were particularly susceptible to some of these things.

So, most people who were coming from far off - especially those without much in the way of resources - would take their prized, spotless lamb, or whatever they had to sacrifice, and they would sell it in their hometown. Then, they would carry the money from that sale with them to Jerusalem, where they would purchase another animal for the sacrifice.

Now, the wealthy and educated folks would make arrangements with someone in town to purchase livestock at a reasonable price. But those who were poor, less educated, or not well connected would often just show up at the temple and purchase an animal there. That’s how this market came to be.

And the guys running the market knew they could take advantage of these people. So, they sold the animals for well above market value. Those who were exchanging foreign currency for the temple currency used to pay the temple tax, were giving horrible exchange rates. So,



even after giving the temple leaders their cut, these guys were making a killing. They were taking advantage of the poor and uneducated in order to line their pockets.

But Jesus wasn't having it. He drove the animals out of the temple. He flipped over the tables of the money-changers. He empowered the poor by refusing to allow them to be taken advantage of. He exposed the merchants and money-changers as crooks and thieves. He put the people on alert that they were being ripped off - empowering them to make educated decisions about where to buy animals or where to change their money.

You see, that's what God does. God loves us enough to empower us. Some people see God as this heavy-handed dictator who tells us what to do all the time, but that's a false view of God. What God actually *loves* to do is to empower us to do things. He likes to clear out the clutter and the noise and the smell and the injustice in our lives and to offer us the opportunity to step into a kind of power that we could never come into on our own.

Here at Trinity, you might hear us talk sometimes about being "empowered by the Spirit." And that's a kind of mystical sounding thing, but what we mean when we say that is very simple. God, through this element of himself that we call the Holy Spirit, gives us the power to do things which we otherwise wouldn't be able to do. Sometimes that might be a really personal empowerment - the power to overcome some strong temptation or addiction, or the power to battle through a deep depression. Those times when we're at our weakest and somehow God gives us this supernatural ability to rise above our circumstance, and we know it doesn't come just from someplace deep inside of us, but it comes through some other means - some spiritual means - through the Holy Spirit.

Other times, though, God empowers us in ways that can have a real impact on others. Sometimes, we're empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak into someone else's life. Sometimes God speaks to us and says, "Hey, here's how you can help that person," or "I have some words for you to tell that person." And let me tell you, that's cool when it happens. I've had times where I've said to someone, "Hey, this doesn't make any sense to me at all, but I feel like God wants me to tell you..." whatever. And the person just looks at me like, "How did you know that?" Like, "Did you put hidden cameras in my house or something?"

No! I didn't. It was God! He empowered me to speak something important to that person - something I didn't understand, but which was exactly what that individual needed to hear in that moment. How cool is that? That kind of stuff can happen when we embrace God and sort of allow ourselves to fall into this kind of empowering love. We can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do stuff that we could never do on our own.

And we can also be empowered to empower others. One of the great things about God's love is that it's really easy to spread. You know, it's like butter that's been sat out on the

counter for a while. You know what I mean? When butter is cold, you can't spread that stuff at all can you? But when it's been sat out, suddenly, it's easy to spread.

God's love is like that. It's super easy to spread. And so when we talked about love that restores, we have the ability to spread that love and help others be restored and reconciled. When we talked about love we can trust, we have the ability to spread that love - to become more trustworthy ourselves - to instill trust in other people. When we talked about love that brings hope, we can spread that love - spread that hope to other people. God's love is really easy to spread, once we learn to embrace it ourselves.

And empowerment is no different. God, in his love, empowers us for incredible things, and one of the things he empowers us to do is to empower others - to pass it on.

But you know what will suck the life out of you? Trying to empower other people without allowing yourself to be empowered by God. You see, as just normal human beings, we don't have enough juice to be giving it away to other people - we'll burn out. That's why there are so many missionaries and relief workers and other people who do a lot of good for a little while, then they find that they don't have anything left. We have to be empowered by God - consistently filled up by him - in order to empower others and to *keep* empowering others.

The cool thing is that this kind of stuff is all part of God's plan. That desire that some of you have hard-wired into you - that desire to help others, to lift other people up, to empower them - that's a God thing. Even if you've never recognized it as such, let me just tell you, that's a God thing. And the more you lean into the love of God - the more you allow him to empower you - the more you'll be able to walk out that vision of empowering other people.

Victor Hugo famously said that "All the forces in the world are not so powerful as an idea whose time has come."

I think the love of God is an idea whose time has come. What would happen if we would allow the love of God to empower us, and to spread from us to empower others? Could we change the world? Maybe. Could we change *our* world? Definitely.

We're going to close today by giving you an opportunity to respond to what you've heard and experienced here. And there are 4 ways we would ask you to consider responding:

### **1. Singing**

We're going to sing a few songs that help us reflect on God's love that empowers.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

### **2. Prayer**

If you need prayer for anything - maybe you heard something today that made you think, or maybe you or someone you know has a physical, emotional, spiritual, or other need. Whatever the case, if you would like someone to pray with you, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

### **3. Communion**

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember him. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us. Over here, we have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

### **4. Giving**

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

### **Closing Prayer**