

Powered by God: why bother?

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Charles River Church
Powered by God for life.

For the Bible text for this talk Click
(or control-click) [Luke 4:1-13](#)
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Happy New Year! I know it's September 17th, but Boston goes by the school year, and this is a new school year. That's why today is Charles River Church's Season Opener, our first worship gathering of the new year. Like every new year, this coming year will be full of opportunities and challenges. You've got to find the energy to get through another year. And my question is, where will you get that power?

This is a serious question because it takes a lot of power to get through the challenges of a new year. That's true whether the challenges are good or bad, happy or sad, successes or failures. I tried to make a list of things people are going to do this year: get married, start a new school, write a dissertation, give birth to a child, try to get a job, get promoted, quit your job, move to a new house, fix up your old house, learn to read, learn to play the piano, act in a play, take care of a sick parent, talk to (or better yet, listen to) your friends about God, go on an overseas vacation, build houses for homeless people, and I don't know what else. It can be exhausting just to name the things people are going to do, let alone to do them. You don't want to be underpowered in the highway of life.



So what's your power source? Well, start with yourself. You are a human being, and



human beings have more power than you realize sometimes. Human beings eradicated smallpox. Human beings figured out how to write with single atoms. Lots of human beings have been able to stay sober for a day, a month, a year, a lifetime after being addicted, and I think that's impressive. What impresses you about what humans can do?

But human power is like a battery. Even the energizer bunny runs down eventually. Human power is like a gas tank. It's got to be refilled. This is not news to you. You've run out of gas before. The question is, how do to fill up your gas tank?

Some people turn to exercise. That's a good thing. Some people like to eat right. That's a good thing too. People get energy from friends and coworkers, I overs and family. People get energy from awards, recognition, bonuses, dean's lists, a word of praise from someone you respect. Yet all of these power sources come down to you, yourself because they all rest on your accomplishments, your abilities, your personality. You have the intelligence to make the dean's list. You *earn* the respect of your peers. Your boyfriend loves you because *you* are so lovable. Your alimentary tract has the right enzymes to digest the food pyramid — based on 8 servings of organic fruits and vegetables, with sugar and fat used sparingly, and saturated fats not at all — and your protoplasm has the right DNA to shape your body into the kind of machine it takes to run a marathon, or at least to get through a Boston winter. Look inside yourself. You have what it takes, right?

If you've been paying attention to the culture around you, you'd better believe you have what it takes. That is the foundation story our culture is built on. That is the message of Nike. Just do it. That is the message of *America's Next Top Model*, that the winner has the perfect combination of beauty, poise, intelligence, and drive.

It's kind of a lonely story — this personal best kind of culture — because it says the way forward is to go it alone. When I was starting a biomedical company 15 years ago, my business partner had this rugged individual orientation down to a science. He didn't believe in market research. He didn't believe in consultants. He didn't believe like the board of directors to know much about what was going on in the company, because he didn't want to have to put up with their advice. And he was a better man than I, more ethical, more dedicated, harder working, more experienced in the biomedical industry, so we ran our company according to our instincts, not according to anyone else's agenda. You have what it takes, right?

**What is man, that thou art
mindful of him? and the son of
man, that thou visitest him?**

**For thou hast made him a little
lower than the angels, and hast
crowned him with glory and
honour.**

**Thou madest him to have
dominion over the works of thy
hands; thou hast put all things
under his feet. Psalm 8:4-7**

That's the question the devil put to Jesus. Here's the story. Jesus made a life transition. As far as we know, he spent the first 30 years of his life as a carpenter. Then he decided to become a teacher. And he got lots of positive feedback on this decision. Just before the part of the Bible we read today, Jesus got baptized, and as he came up out of the water, and a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you." That's pretty good feedback. But you know how right after something good happens, you're waiting to get slammed by something bad? Well that happened to Jesus. As soon as God tells him how pleased he is with him, he ends up on a camping trip gone bad, and he has nothing to eat for 40 days. This was before Pizza Hut delivered to the wilderness of Judea. And he found himself being tested, or tempted, by the devil to forget about searching for God's direction and power in his life, and to just take care of all his needs by himself.



People ask, is this bit about the devil real? Is there really an evil being, and was talking to Jesus, or was this just in Jesus's imagination. After 40 days with nothing to eat, it could be either one. The question about whether evil is real — I leave that up to you. Seems real enough to me. As to Jesus's imagination, by that point I'd probably be having a conversation with Julia Child about beef Wellington. Which is sort of what happened to Jesus. He's very hungry. He's talking about food, but he knows that what the devil is offering him is not good. I've been tempted by other people, and I've been tempted by my own imagination, and they both come round to the same thing; you get it into your head to do the wrong thing. That's why it's called a temptation. And in this episode, Jesus is being tempted to go it alone, to depend on his own abilities to give him the power he needs for his new job of teaching people how to draw near to God.

What would cause you to be tempted to depend only on yourself for the power you need in life? Would success give you the temptation to depend on yourself? Good grades or a good performance review, success in love? Maybe. But I actually find it's easiest to let God into my life when things are going well. I'm willing to depend on God, when I don't really *need* to depend on God. The real temptation to depend on myself alone comes exactly when I'm failing to meet my own needs. Following the self-made-person story of our culture, you get sucked into a downward spiral of failure and isolation, right at the moment you most need to ask for help, right when you're 40 days hungry and you're alone in the wilderness. When you think, "I was an admissions mistake," when you think, "I just don't cut it in this job," when you realize that she is drifting away from you and there's nothing you can do about it, that's when you realize that you can't give yourself the power you need in life, yet that's also when you're most tempted to try to go it alone.

It takes an incredible amount of spiritual maturity to admit that you cannot be your own power source. To admit that is an insult to the foundation story of our time — the story that you just do it — and the fact that Jesus realizes that being his own power source is a dead end, is almost reason enough by itself to make me want to follow him. The irony is that Jesus still had some gas left in his tank, even after 40 days. He was the Son of God, meaning that he had — he was — all of God that you could stuff into a human being. He had resources not available to the average person, and could have gotten himself all the food he wanted. But he had the spiritual maturity to recognize that he needed not just all of God that could be stuffed into humanity, but all of God that spills over into time, and space, matter, and energy, and beyond.



I wish he had given a long, spiritual answer to the devil, so that I could cleverly examine the subtleties of his words. But what he says is simplicity itself. "No!" he says, "The Scriptures say, 'People need more than bread for their life..'" So all I can do is ask you, do you need more for life, than you can provide for yourself?

Well, alright, if you don't depend on your own power in life, I guess you can depend on someone else's power. For example, some people attach themselves to a spouse or lover. Others attach themselves to a person in power in business or politics. Others get attached to celebrities — just look at all the celebrity magazines, TV shows and websites — although there's something kind of sad in getting your sense of worth from Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp or Scarlett Johansson, when they don't even know you exist. Anyway, if you're not sure you have the power to get yourself through life, there are lots of ways to try to get your power from someone else.



That's the second temptation Jesus faced. The devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said "I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them — because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you will bow down and worship me." You want to get really powered for life, I got what you need.

There two obvious weaknesses in the devil's argument. First, who died and made him God? He claims to own all the kingdoms of the earth, but he's obviously lying. God owns all the kingdoms of the earth, even if they're not following God very well at the moment. And secondly, in order to get what the devil offers, you have to worship him. Who wants to worship someone else? I don't think this is a big temptation to most people nowadays. There's a lot of fascination with celebrities lives, but I don't think there's a lot of actual worship going on. This is one thing our age has gotten right — it doesn't make sense to get your power source from worshipping someone else. It's like we actually get it, we actually do hold this truth to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. So if you can't get enough power from yourself, you're not going to get it from anybody else, either. The days when your whole life was made worthwhile when you were given a room in the royal palace are long gone, and so are the days when wives lived through their husbands, and husbands through their bosses, for the most part.

The Lord is king! He rules all the nations. Psalm 22:28
For God is the King over all the earth. Praise him with a psalm! Psalm 47:7



The only exception I see is educational institutions. People are still willing to bow down to universities and schools as a way of trying to get their children powered for life and work. And universities love to be worshiped — isn't that what "lifelong learning" is all about, a lifelong dependency on the god of BU or Harvard or MIT, just to mention the three closest universities? In the middle ages, the one institution to which you could give praise, or service, or money without any fear of getting in trouble, was the church, because the whole society agreed to worship God. Today, the one institution to which you can give praise, or service, or money without any fear of getting in trouble, is the university, because our whole society has agreed to worship.... The question is, when the university claims to have the power to give you what you want in life, is it telling a lie or telling the truth?

OK let's go back to Jesus. The devil tempted him to be powered by himself. He didn't buy that. The devil tempted him to be powered by someone else (the devil). He didn't buy that. What's left? The devil tempts Jesus to jump off the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem. This temptation is hard to figure out exactly. What exactly is tempting about it? At first it looks like the devil is tempting Jesus to commit suicide. There is no power source you can depend on, so just jump off a cliff. But no, the idea isn't that Jesus will die, but that angels will have to come rescue him, like he's going to force God's hand or something.

Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He orders his angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone.' "
 Luke 4:9-11

The best I can make of this is an observation Johanna made in the last worship scrum. She said, maybe the devil is tempting Jesus to become just a thrill seeker, to just string along one peak experience after another, and try to make a life out of that. That's a shot that's right on target today. If you look at how people live — people who can afford it, I mean — that's what people do, pile up experience on experience. I know I do. There's only so many days till this life is over, and my goal seems to be to cram in as many experiences as I can before I stop ticking.

I remember this all the way back to high school, when I went to the World Boy Scout Jamboree in Norway. Why? Because it would be the "experience of a lifetime." I did my junior year abroad in Scotland, for the experience of it. Same with my trip to Burma. Even when I'm supposedly serving other people, I'm always angling for the thrill factor, like when I led four trips to Honduras to build houses. It wouldn't have been much of a thrill to lead four trips to Chelsea fix up elementary schools, would it? I came to Boston for the experience of attending one of the big name universities — sort of mixing temptation 2 and temptation 3 — and you know what, it was a fantastic experience. There are other, darker, things I've done in my life, because I didn't want to miss out on the experience. In other times in human history, people made choices because they didn't want to inadvertently do anything immoral — or shameful, maybe. In our time in human history, people make choices because they don't want to inadvertently miss out any great experiences.



What about you? Are you living by piling up experiences? Here's a few ideas, if you need help: driving fast, drinking games, clubbing, mood-enhancing substances, friends with benefits, travel, extreme sports or other ways to prove yourself, Or, if you're raising kids, it's almost a child abuse in suburban culture *not* to give your kids every conceivable experience: soccer, hockey, tennis camp, a new computer, music lessons, amazing birthday parties. I can even think of spiritual thrills: a trip to the holy land or Mt.

Fuji, wilderness retreats and ropes courses, even incense and bells, and long beautiful robes, if you're into that sort of thing (and I am!) I'm not saying these experiences are bad — at least not all of them are bad — I'm just asking, "What's *your* power source?"

Jesus rejected the temptation of thrill seeking, just as he did the first two temptations. He refused to be powered by himself. He refused to be powered by someone else, and he refused to be powered by thrills. I want you to remember he refused all these temptations while he was 40 days hungry. He didn't refuse these temptations because he was strong, but because he was weak. He was weak enough at that point to know that none of these temptations could give him the power he needed to be fully alive. Are you with me? He didn't refuse these temptations because they were too alluring. He refused them because they weren't alluring enough. He wanted more from life, not less.

This Bible episode doesn't give the answer to the question of how to get the power you need in life. It ends with Jesus still hungry. Of course, you can tell what the answer is going to be: get your power from God. Jesus answers every temptation with a



reference to God, so you get it that God is the power source Jesus is going to turn to because he wants more from life, not less. But this episode doesn't say *how* to get powered by God for life. And neither does this talk. The *next* three weeks we will talk about how to be powered by God for life. What it looks like, what it feels like, how specifically to do it in various situations. But this talk just raises the question, "why bother?"

When I end a talk title with a question mark, it usually means I'm going to turn the question back to you. So here goes: All through this week, ask yourself, "Why bother being powered by God? See how many times you can remember to ask yourself, What is my power source at this moment? Am I depending on myself, on someone else, or am I just riding along for the experience? Is what I'm experiencing enough for me, or do I want more? So next week, come back knowing why you care about being powered by God at all. Otherwise coming to church is just another thrilling experience.

The scriptures say:

1. **"People need more than bread for their life."** (Deuteronomy 8:3)
2. **"You must worship the Lord your God; serve only him."** (Deuteronomy 10:20)
3. **"Do not test the Lord your God."** (Deuteronomy 6:16)

Questions

1. Why did you bother to come to church today?
2. Does one of the temptations Jesus faced feel "hot" to you right now? Do you dare to talk about it?
3. What's one thing you can do to help you remember to ask yourself "What is my power source right now?" several times this week?