

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: October 2, 2011
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“POWER? OR FOLLY?”
Matthew 4:1-11; 26:47-52

Adam and Eve’s defiance did not seem like much at the time: all they did was eat a piece of fruit. Yet it triggered a tsunami that flooded the planet with struggle, grief and pain, a wave of insecurity that has yet to subside.

Cain made it worse. With the murder of his brother he introduced a whole new category of sin to the world. He {Hos 8:7} “[sowed] **the wind and** [reaped] **the whirlwind,**” a whirlwind of violence that is destroying lives even now.

Adam, Eve and Cain, we are your heirs, inheritors of the mess you made. Your sin has subjected us to danger, doubt, anxiety and fear. Thank you very much!

Yet we cannot blame it all on you. We are accomplices who collaborate in our own ruin! James 1:14-15: Each of us **“is dragged away and enticed” “by [our] own evil desire”** and **“after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”** – and (I will add) its twin, insecurity.

Human beings are desperate for security. Is it any wonder that we, as a group, eagerly follow gods that will promise safety and confidence?! Counterfeit gods like coercive power, material wealth, and false religion.

❑ Please turn to Matthew 4. God the Son stands poised on the brink of ministry. The Holy Spirit leads him out into the dangerous desert, where the devil assaults him. Satan’s goal is to stop Christ from establishing God’s

Kingdom, and so he shrewdly suggests that Jesus should use the realistic, utilitarian methods of the world to attain his worthy ends.

○ Verses 8-9 record the third temptation: **“The devil... [shows] him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he [says], ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’”**

Satan knows that Jesus is not about to become a devil worshiper. Could there be a subtler temptation beneath the surface, one to which the Enemy thinks his prey might succumb? I believe so.

Worldly kingdoms depend, in part, on coercive power to rule their citizens and restrain their enemies. The Enemy is offering Jesus ownership of this coercive power, along with the kingdoms themselves.

But what if the Lord were to seize that power without bowing down? He could wield the coercive powers of intimidation, threat and violence against the wicked, securing safety and freeing us from doubt, anxiety, and fear! Don’t the ends justify the means?

Evidently not: the Messiah steadfastly refuses not only to worship Satan, but also to take up coercive power.

❑ Let’s fast forward to Matthew 26:47-52. The culmination of Christ’s ministry is imminent. Judas arrives in the garden with **“a large crowd”** of thugs **“armed with swords and clubs.”** Peter draws his weapon and lashes out in an effort to protect his beloved Messiah from arrest and execution. What does the Lord say? Verse 52: **“Put your sword back**

in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”

Jesus stops Peter because the sword is the anti-cross. If he allows him to use coercive force it will nullify the core condition of discipleship: “[denying] [oneself] **and** [taking] **up** [the] **cross and** [following]” Jesus (**Mt 16:24**).

Consequently, coercive power cannot guarantee security. If it could, the people who use intimidation, threats and violence to get ahead would be the most secure. But consider Cain: after he murders Abel he cries out, {Ge 4:14, NLT} **“All who see me will try to kill me!”** Consider the mean girl who is terrified her victims will get even, the gangbanger who guns down his rival and thereby becomes a target, or the nation that drops the atomic bomb and spends the next few decades teaching its children to “Duck and cover.”

Living by the cross instead of the sword is difficult! Not only does it contradict our sinful impulses, Scripture itself contains seemingly paradoxical teachings on the subject. Devout Christ Followers come down on every side of the issue.

What is absolutely clear is that coercive power is not, and can never be, our guarantor of security. Psalm 20:7 {NLT/NIV} puts it like this: **“Some trust in armies and weapons, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.”**

Coercive power promises total security; at best, it provides limited coverage for a limited time. Given our trust and hope, it becomes a counterfeit god.

The True God sent his Son to the cross. And his Son said: {Mt 10:38, NRSV} **“whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”**

To seek security in the cross sounds counter-intuitive (if not crazy) in a world as dangerous and anxious as this one. Indeed, it {1 Co 1:18} **“is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”**

The LORD declares: {Ps 75:3} **“When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm.”** Let us tear down the idol of coercive power, and rely wholeheartedly on him.