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Sermon—14Jul19
Col. 1
“Strength Test”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

A generation ago, *gyms* were a rare phenomenon. Now they’re in every neighborhood. Your insurance company might even pay your fees if you want to join one!

Gym users once were mostly men. Today, on an average evening, there might be just as many women working out as there are men.

There are several reasons for the new popularity of gyms. People pay more attention to how they look. Everyone carries a camera along with them on their cell phones, so they want to make a good appearance if they send a photo of themselves to a friend.

In addition, the Internet is full of advice about how exercise helps people to be healthy and live longer. Many folks today want to see what working out can do for them.

But another reason all these gyms have opened is particularly important: exercise makes us *feel* better. If we are more physically fit, we have more energy. We are able to lead a more active life.

And because we appreciate being in good shape, we are encouraged by St. Paul’s words that we heard in today’s First Lesson: Paul writes, “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from [God’s] glorious power...”

In the text, Paul goes on to tell us how the Spirit transforms the whole of our lives. He says, “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.”

In this passage, Paul is telling us *how God works*. The Spirit of God fills us with power, and that power allows us to endure suffering and to bear it with patience. Then, having survived our tribulations, we are able to give thanks to God.

Strength. Power. Endurance. Patience. Thanksgiving. In the miraculous chemistry of the Spirit, these qualities all work together.

But notice how the process begins with strength. If you have strength, then you can summon up the inner resources you need to face your problems.

I think it’s vitally important to see Christianity in this way: we need to realize that our faith makes us strong. I think that this idea is a welcome contrast with another picture of Christianity that some critics of our religion like to draw.

For example, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche rejected the Christian religion because it seemed to him to make human beings *weak*. The Christian God appeared to demand absolute slave-like obedience. For Nietzsche, this wasn’t an attractive way to live your life.

Did Nietzsche have a point? After all, Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” He also said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.” Don’t these sayings that idealize humility contradict the promise that our faith brings us strength?

In fact, though, I don’t believe that we have to equate meekness with *weakness*. You can be “humble” and still be an attractive person.

For example, you might be “meek” in the admirable sense that you choose not to be arrogant and aggressive toward other people. In this case, you can be humble and still be a strong person who makes her own decisions and is also able to stand up for others.

An example of someone who embodied this kind of Christian faith that we might think of from history would be *William Wilberforce*. Wilberforce was a crucial leader in the abolitionist movement in England in the 1800's.

Wilberforce was personally modest and self-effacing despite his considerable wealth, yet he still chose to resist the powerful pro-slavery forces in British and colonial society at that time. In the case of William Wilberforce, being humble didn't preclude being strong.

And notice, again, that St. Paul is suggesting that, as strength comes to us from God, it may emerge intertwined with other virtues. For Paul, strength came with endurance, as well as with patience and courage.

So God sustained St. Paul when he was in prison under the threat of a death sentence. Paul knew all about being in a weak position!

One of my favorite lines from Paul's writings is this one: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Even when things are at their worst, Christ gives us strength.

You may have read in the financial news about "stress tests." Bank regulators apply these tests to banks to be sure that they have enough capital if the economy takes a downturn and the banks start to lose money.

Now what we Christians need sometimes is a "strength test." We need to find out where we are strong.

At the same time—and, perhaps more importantly—we need to be aware of areas in our lives where we are *not* so strong! None of us is superhuman; we all need God's help from time to time.

Then, when we become aware of our strengths and weaknesses, we are more able to make the best choices in difficult situations.

You may be struggling with a family relationship that has become shaky. You realize that you need God's grace to help you face your problem.

For instance, you may need a superabundance of prayer to give you the courage to make the call to your family member that will get your relationship moving again.

Maybe you don't do well in conflict situations. (I had a boss once who absolutely *thrived* in conflict. He loved nothing more than a good battle! In my experience, though, he was an exception.)

If you're not like my boss, you'll welcome the grace of the Spirit. You'll want to go forth into the argument you need to have, clothed with the armor of God!

That means you'll want to be sure that you prepare yourself by praying for guidance—and also praying for the person you disagree with. You're more likely to appreciate the opposing point of view if you have offered up prayers on behalf of your enemy.

As St. Paul said, strength comes along with patience, endurance, power, and thanksgiving. We need patience when we can't summon up the strength we need right away. We need endurance, when the stresses of life drain away our strength. We need the power of God when our own resources aren't enough to keep us going.

Finally, we need thanksgiving. Receiving the gifts of God's grace, we can, in Paul's words, "joyfully [give] thanks to the Father, who has enabled [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light."

Amen.