

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Rethinking Religion*
Service Theme: *Rethinking Real Strength*
Sermon Theme: *Real Strength Has Real Purpose*
March 24, 2024— Mark 14-15

Have you ever watched the World's Strongest Man competition? It's coming up in May in Myrtle Beach if you want to catch it live! Each year, 20 "strongmen" from around the world compete to determine who will be crowned "world's strongest man." The events they compete in are quite a sight to behold. There's the keg toss, which requires the athletes to toss 50-pound kegs over a 15-foot-high wall. Another event tests the athletes to see how fast they can pull a commercial airliner 100 ft. Then there's the Atlas Stones, where the athletes must lift five 350-pound spherical stones onto platforms as quickly as possible. And these dudes are massive! They look like small mountains, sporting biceps bigger than your head! When you watch these powerful athletes performing such jaw-dropping feats, you can't help but marvel at their raw, real strength.

Which is how everyone in religion wants to see their God too, isn't it? We want to see God displaying real strength; flexing his muscles and looking mighty; showing off his power. I think the reason why is because it's easier to put our trust in a God who's always displaying real strength and doing powerful miracles, because that means he'll be strong enough to defeat all our enemies, and make everything in our lives turn out the way we want!

But out of the six Scripture readings from Jesus' passion that we heard this morning, how many showed Jesus looking like the world's strongest man? How many showed Jesus as the powerful, almighty God that religion desires? None, right? Arrested, falsely tried, beaten, mocked, crucified, killed, buried. Where's the strength? He doesn't even fight back! Even on Palm Sunday, his grand, triumphant entrance, he rides into Jerusalem not on a strong, powerful war horse,

but on a humble beast of burden. From these readings this morning, we might think that Jesus lacks the real strength we want to see in God! That's certainly what the Jews and Romans who mocked this weak, broken man as his life ebbed away on the cross thought.

But this morning, as we rethink religion, we especially need to rethink real strength as we review our Savior's passion. What is real strength, really? If real strength is only sheer, brute force like strongmen pulling airplanes and carrying boulders, then Jesus lacks the real strength religion wants. He was so weak he couldn't even carry the wooden cross beam he would be nailed to. And if real strength means being able to defeat all your enemies and make everything in your life turn out the way you want, then Jesus lacks the real strength religion wants. It very much looks like Jesus' enemies had the upper hand as he hung dying on the cross, doesn't it?

But here's what we need to rethink about real strength. Real strength isn't just brute force, or miraculous power that translates into success.

Real Strength Has Real Purpose.

Whenever I watch one of those strongest man competitions, I find myself marveling at their strength. But at the same time, I often ask myself, "What's the point of this?" I mean, it's great that you're strong enough to throw 50-pound kegs over a 15-foot-high wall, but when will that strength serve a purpose in my life? And you pulling a 747 makes for a pretty cool picture, but when will that strength serve any purpose in my life? It might be impressive strength, but it's not purposeful strength.

But real strength often looks like weakness when it has a real purpose. Think of the real strength it takes for an addict to admit their addiction, confess that they can't fight it themselves, and acknowledge that they need help. Outwardly, that might look like weakness, but because it serves as impactful purpose, it's actually real strength. And if you or someone you love has been in those shoes, you know the real strength it takes!

Or consider a person who sacrifices themselves to save the life of another. Whether it's through injury or death, that person's sacrifice will cause them to become weaker than they were before. I mean, you can't get much weaker than dead, right? But because that weakness serves the impactful purpose of saving another, that sacrifice is actually real strength.

If you're a parent, you've maybe had to hold onto your child while they've undergone a medical procedure. For my two oldest kids, I had to hold them as babies while the doctor snipped the tongue tie and lip tie in their mouths. And you hang on to them so tightly as their little bodies jump in pain and they start to cry; and the tears well up in your eyes too. But they look up at you almost as if to say, "Why are you letting them do this? Why aren't you stopping them from hurting me?" To that hurting child, mom or dad's inactivity to intervene might appear like weakness. But as the parent, you know the real strength it takes to let something painful happen to your child so that a more necessary purpose can be accomplished!

That's why, as we see Jesus looking so weak and defeated in these passion history readings, and throughout this upcoming Holy Week, what we're actually seeing is Jesus' real strength! This is the God who created the whole world just by saying the word. The same Jesus who drives out demons, heals the sick and handicapped, and even raises the dead just by saying the word. If he had wanted to stop what took place in all of these readings, he could have just by saying the word. But just as Isaiah prophesied, ***"He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."***

But Jesus' silence to defend himself before false accusations, and his lack of fighting back to save himself—as much as it might look like weakness, is actually Jesus' real strength. Because it served the ultimate purpose! The ultimate purpose of forgiving the sins of you and me and all people! Of winning eternal salvation for the world!

A far greater strength than pulling an airplane is bearing the sins of the world. A far greater strength than lifting heavy boulders is bearing the weight of the world's guilt and shame. A far greater strength than

hurling kegs over a wall is hurling our sins as far from us as east is from west.

In one week, we'll see again Jesus' greatest power and glory on display as he defeats death. But for now, we see him weak, suffering, and dying. We see Jesus crowned not as the world's strongest man, but with a crown of thorns. But make no mistake, that man of sorrows, looking so weak, humble, and defeated is the strongest man who ever lived. Because his real strength has real purpose—for us.