

"The Power of the Will"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. V sermon 24
St. John Henry Newman
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"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might." Ephes. vi.
10.

1 [Note] WE know that there are great multitudes of professed Christians, who, alas! have
2 actually turned from God with a deliberate will and purpose, and, in consequence, are at
3 present strangers to the grace of God; though they do not know, or do not care about
4 this. But a vast number of Christians, half of the whole number at least, are in other
5 circumstances. They have not thrown themselves out of a state of grace, nor have they
6 to repent and turn to God, in the sense in which those must, who have allowed
7 themselves in wilful transgression, after the knowledge of the truth has been imparted to
8 them. Numbers there are in all ranks of life, who, having good parents and advisers, or
9 safe homes, or religious pursuits, or being without strong feelings and passions, or for
10 whatever reason, cannot be supposed to have put off from them the garment of divine
11 grace, and deserted to the ranks of the enemy. Yet are they not safe, nevertheless. It is
12 plain,—for surely it is not enough to avoid evil in order to attain to heaven,—we must
13 follow after good. What, then, is their danger?—That of the unprofitable servant who hid
14 his lord's money. As far removed as that slothful servant was from those who traded
15 with their talents, in his state and in his destiny, so far separate from one another are
16 two classes of Christians who live together here as brethren,—the one class is using
17 grace, the other neglecting it; one is making progress, the other sitting still; one is
18 working for a reward, the other is idle and worthless.

19 This view of things should ever be borne in mind when we speak of the state of grace.
20 There are different degrees in which we may stand in God's favour; we may be rising or
21 sinking in His favour; we may not have forfeited it, yet we may not be securing it; we
22 may be safe for the present, but have a dangerous prospect before us. We may be
23 more or less "hypocrites," "slothful," "unprofitable," and yet our day of grace not be
24 passed. We may still have the remains of our new nature lingering on us, the influences
25 of grace present with us, and the power of amendment and conversion within us. We
26 may still have talents which we may put to account, and gifts which we may stir up. We
27 may not be cast out of our state of justification, and yet may be destitute of that love of
28 God, love of God's truth, love of holiness, love of active and generous obedience, that
29 honest surrender of self, which alone will secure to us hereafter the blessed words,
30 "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." [Matt. xxv. 21.]

31 The only qualification which will avail us for heaven is the love of God. We may keep
32 from gross sinning, and yet not have this divine gift, "without which we are dead" in
33 God's sight. This changes our whole being; this makes us live; this makes us grow in
34 grace and abound in good works; this makes us fit for God's presence hereafter.

35 Now, here I have said a number of things, each of which will bear drawing out by itself,
36 and insisting on.

37 No one can doubt that we are again and again exhorted in Scripture to be holy and
38 perfect, to be holy and blameless in the sight of God, to be holy as He is holy, to keep
39 the commandments, to fulfil the law, to be filled with the fruit of righteousness. Why do
40 we not obey as we ought? Many people will answer that we have a fallen nature, which
41 hinders us; that we cannot help it, though we ought to be very sorry for it; that this is the
42 reason of our shortcomings. Not so: we can help it; we are not hindered; what we want
43 is the will; and it is our own fault that we have it not. We have all things granted to us;
44 God has abounded in His mercies to us; we have a depth of power and strength lodged
45 in us; but we have not the heart, we have not the will, we have not the love to use it. We
46 lack this one thing, a desire to be new made; and I think any one who examines himself
47 carefully, will own that he does, and that this is the reason why he cannot and does not
48 obey or make progress in holiness.

49 That we have this great gift within us, or are in a state of grace, for the two statements
50 mean nearly the same thing, is very plain of course from Scripture. We all know what
51 Scripture says on the subject, and yet even here it may be as well to dwell on one or
52 two passages by way of reminding and impressing ourselves.

53 Consider then our Saviour's words: "The water that I shall give him, shall be in him
54 a *well of water* springing up into everlasting life." [John iv. 14.] Exhaust the sea, it will
55 not fill the infinite spaces of the heavens, but the gift within us may be drawn out till it
56 fills eternity.

57 Again, consider St. Paul's most wonderful words in the Epistle from which the text is
58 taken, when he gives glory to "Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all
59 that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us." [Ephes. iii. 20.] You
60 observe here, that there is a power given to us Christians, which "worketh in us," a
61 special hidden mysterious power, which makes us its instruments. Even that we have
62 souls, is strange and mysterious. We do not see our souls; but we see in others and we
63 are conscious in ourselves of a principle which rules our bodies, and makes them what
64 the brutes are not. We have that in us which informs our bodies, and changes them
65 from mere animal bodies into human. Brutes cannot talk; brutes have little expression of
66 countenance; they cannot form into societies; they cannot progress. Why? Because
67 they have not that hidden gift which we have?—reason. Well, in like manner St. Paul
68 speaks of Christians too as having a special power within them, which they gain
69 because they are, and when they become Christians; and he calls it, in the text to which
70 I am referring, "the power that worketh in us." In a former chapter of the Epistle, he
71 speaks of "the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to
72 the working of His mighty power;" [Ephes. i. 19.] and he says that our eyes must be
73 enlightened in order to recognise it; and he compares it to that divine power in Christ
74 our Saviour, by which, working in due season, He was raised from the dead, so that the
75 bonds of death had no dominion over Him. As seeds have life in them, which seem
76 lifeless, so the Body of Christ had life in itself, when it was dead; and so also, though

not in a similar way, we too, sinners as we are, have a spiritual principle in us, if we did but exert it, so great, so wondrous, that all the powers in the visible world, all the conceivable forces and appetites of matter, all the physical miracles which are at this day in process of discovery, almost superseding time and space, dispensing with numbers, and rivalling mind, all these powers of nature are nothing to this gift within us. Why do I say this? because the Apostle tells us that God is able thereby "to do *exceeding abundantly above all* that we ask or think." You see he labours for words to express the exuberant, overflowing fulness, the vast and unfathomable depth, or what he has just called "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the gift given us. And hence he elsewhere says, "I can do *all things* through Christ, which *strengtheneth* me;" [Phil. iv. 13.] where he uses the same word which occurs also in the text,—"*My brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.*" See, what an accumulation of words! First, be *strong* or be ye made strong. Strong in what? strong in power. In the power of what? in the power of His might, the might of God. Three words are used one on another, to express the manifold gift which God has given us. He to might has added power, and power He has made grow into strength. We have the power of His might; nor only so, but the strength of the power of His might who is Almighty.

And this is the very account which St. Luke gives us of St. Paul's own state in the Acts, after his conversion. The Jews wondered, but "Saul increased the more in *strength*, and confounded the Jews who dwelt at Damascus." [Acts ix. 22.] He became more and more strong. And, at the end of his course, when brought before the Romans, "The Lord," as he says, "stood with him, and *strengthened* him;" and in turn he too exhorts Timothy, "Thou, therefore, my son, be *strong* in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." [2 Tim. ii. 1-3; iv. 17.]

I said just now that we did not need Scripture to tell us of our divinely imparted power; that our own consciousness was sufficient. I do not mean to say that our consciousness will enable us to rise to the fulness of the Apostle's expressions; for trial, of course, cannot ascertain an inexhaustible gift. All we can know of it by experience is, that it goes beyond *us*, that we have never fathomed it, that we have drawn from it, and never emptied it; that we have evidence that there is a power with us, how great we know not, which does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and is always equal to all our needs. And of as much as this, I think, we have abundant evidence.

Let us ask ourselves, why is it that we so often wish to do right and cannot? why is it that we are so frail, feeble, languid, wayward, dim-sighted, fluctuating, perverse? why is it that we cannot "do the things that we would?" why is it that, day after day, we remain irresolute, that we serve God so poorly, that we govern ourselves so weakly and so variably, that we cannot command our thoughts, that we are so slothful, so cowardly, so discontented, so sensual, so ignorant? Why is it that we, who trust that we are not by wilful sin thrown out of grace (for of such I am all along speaking) why is it that we, who are ruled by no evil masters and bent upon no earthly ends, who are not covetous, or

120 profligate livers, or worldly-minded, or ambitious, or envious, or proud, or unforgiving, or
121 desirous of name,—why is it that we, in the very kingdom of grace, surrounded by
122 Angels, and preceded by Saints, nevertheless can do so little, and instead of mounting
123 with wings like eagles, grovel in the dust, and do but sin, and confess sin, alternately? Is
124 it that the *power* of God is not within us? Is it literally that we are *not able* to perform
125 God's commandments? God forbid! We are able. We have that given us which makes
126 us able. We are not in a state of nature. We have had the gift of grace implanted in us.
127 We have a power within us to do what we are commanded to do. What is it we lack?
128 The power? No; the will. What we lack is the real, simple, earnest, sincere inclination
129 and aim to use what God has given us, and what we have in us. I say, our experience
130 tells us this. It is no matter of mere doctrine, much less a matter of words, but of things;
131 a very practical plain matter.

132 To take an instance of the simple kind. Is not the power to use our limbs our own, nay,
133 even by nature? What then is sloth but a want of will? When we are not set on an object
134 so greatly as to overcome the inconvenience of an effort, we remain as we are;—when
135 we ought to exert ourselves we are slothful. But is the effort any effort at all, when we
136 desire that which needs the effort?

137 In like manner, to take a greater thing. Are not the feelings as distinct as well can be,
138 between remorse and repentance? In both a man is very sorry and ashamed of what he
139 has done; in both he has a painful foreboding that he may perchance sin again in spite
140 of his present grief. You will hear a man perhaps lament that he is so weak, so that he
141 quite dreads what is to come another time, after all his good resolutions. There are
142 cases, doubtless, in which a man is thus weak in power, though earnest in will; and, of
143 course, it continually happens that he has ungovernable feelings and passions in spite
144 of his better nature. But in a very great multitude of cases this pretence of want of power
145 is really but a want of will. When a man complains that he is under the dominion of any
146 bad habit, let him seriously ask himself whether he has ever *willed* to get rid of it. Can
147 he, with a simple mind, say in God's sight, "I wish it removed?"

148 A man, for instance, cannot attend to his prayers; his mind wanders; other thoughts
149 intrude; time after time passes, and it is the same. Shall we say, this arises from want of
150 power? Of coarse it may be so; but before he says so, let him consider whether he has
151 ever roused himself, shaken himself, awakened himself, got himself to will, if I may so
152 say, attention. We know the feeling in unpleasant dreams, when we say to ourselves,
153 "This is a dream," and yet cannot exert ourselves to will to be free from it; and how at
154 length by an effort we will to move, and the spell at once is broken; we wake. So it is
155 with sloth and indolence; the Evil One lies heavy on us, but he has no power over us
156 except in our unwillingness to get rid of him. He cannot battle with us; he flies; he can
157 do no more, as soon as we propose to fight with him.

158 There is a famous instance of a holy man of old time, who, before his conversion, felt
159 indeed the excellence of purity, but could not get himself to say more in prayer than
160 "Give me chastity, but not yet." I will not be inconsiderate enough to make light of the
161 power of temptation of any kind, nor will I presume to say that Almighty God will

162 certainly shield a man from temptation for his wishing it; but whenever men complain, as
163 they often do, of the arduousness of a high virtue, at least it were well that they should
164 first ask themselves the question, whether they desire to have it. We hear much in this
165 day of the impossibility of heavenly purity;—far be it from me to say that every one has
166 not his proper gift from God, one after this manner another after that;—but, O ye men of
167 the world, when ye talk, as ye do, so much of the impossibility of this or that
168 supernatural grace, when you disbelieve in the existence of severe self-rule, when you
169 scoff at holy resolutions, and affix a slur on those who make them, are you sure that the
170 impossibility which you insist upon does not lie, not in nature, but in the will? Let us but
171 will, and our nature is changed, "according to the power that worketh in us." Say not, in
172 excuse for others or for yourselves, that you cannot be other than Adam made you; you
173 have never brought yourselves to will it,—you cannot bear to will it. You cannot bear to
174 be other than you are. Life would seem a blank to you, were you other; yet what you are
175 from not desiring a gift, this you make an excuse for not possessing it.

176 Let us take what trial we please,—the world's ridicule or censure, loss of prospects, loss
177 of admirers or friends, loss of ease, endurance of bodily pain,—and recollect how easy
178 our course has been, directly we had once made up our mind to submit to it; how simple
179 all that remained became, how wonderfully difficulties were removed from without, and
180 how the soul was strengthened inwardly to do what was to be done. But it is seldom we
181 have heart to throw ourselves, if I may so speak, on the Divine Arm; we dare not trust
182 ourselves on the waters, though Christ bids us. We have not St. Peter's love to ask
183 leave to come to Him upon the sea. When we once are filled with that heavenly charity,
184 we can do all things, because we attempt all things,—for to attempt is to do.

185 I would have every one carefully consider whether he has ever found God fail him in
186 trial, when his own heart had not failed him; and whether he has not found strength
187 greater and greater given him according to his day; whether he has not gained clear
188 proof on trial that he *has* a divine power lodged within him, and a certain conviction
189 withal that he has not made the extreme trial of it, or reached its limits. Grace ever
190 outstrips prayer. Abraham ceased interceding ere God stayed from granting. Joash
191 smote upon the ground but thrice, when he might have gained five victories or six. All
192 have the gift, many do not use it at all, none expend it. One wraps it in a napkin, another
193 gains five pounds, another ten. It will bear thirty-fold, or sixty, or a hundred. We know
194 not what we are, or might be. As the seed has a tree within it, so men have within them
195 Angels.

196 Hence the great stress laid in Scripture on growing in grace. Seeds are intended to
197 grow into trees. We are regenerated in order that we may be renewed daily after the
198 Image of Him who has regenerated us. In the text and verses following, we have our
199 calling set forth, in order to "stir up our pure minds, by way of remembrance," [2 Pet. iii.
200 1.] to the pursuit of it. "Be strong in the Lord," says the Apostle, "and in the power of His
201 might. Put on the whole armour of God," with your loins girt about with truth, the
202 breastplate of righteousness, your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace,
203 the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. One grace and then

204 another is to be perfected in us. Each day is to bring forth its own treasure, till we stand,
205 like blessed spirits, able and waiting to do the will of God.

206 Still more apposite are St. Peter's words, which go through the whole doctrine which I
207 have been insisting on, point by point. First, he tells us that "divine power hath given
208 unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness;" [2 Pet. i. 3.] that is, we have
209 the *gift*. Then he speaks of the *object* which the gift is to effect,—"*exceeding great and*
210 *precious promises are given unto us, that by these we may be partakers of the divine*
211 *nature*;" that we who, by birth, are children of wrath, should become inwardly and really
212 sons of God; putting off our former selves, or, as he says, "having escaped the
213 corruption that is in the world through lust;" that is, cleansing ourselves from all that
214 remains in us of original sin, the infection of concupiscence. With which closely agree
215 St. Paul's words to the Corinthians, "Having these promises," he says, "dearly beloved,
216 let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in
217 the fear of God." [2 Cor. vii. 1.] But to continue with St. Peter,—"*Giving all diligence*," he
218 says, "add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance,
219 and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly
220 kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity." Next he speaks of those who, though they
221 cannot be said to have forfeited God's grace, yet by a sluggish will and a lukewarm love
222 have become but unprofitable, and "cumber the ground" in the Lord's vineyard. "He that
223 lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was
224 purged from his old sins,"—has forgotten that cleansing which he once received, when
225 he was brought into the kingdom of grace. "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give
226 diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never
227 fall; for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly, into the everlasting
228 kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Day by day shall ye enter deeper and
229 deeper into the fulness of the riches of that kingdom, of which ye are made members.

230 Or, lastly, consider St. Paul's account of the same growth, and of the course of it, in his
231 Epistle to the Romans. "Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and
232 experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed." Such is the series of gifts, patience,
233 experience, hope, a soul without shame,—and whence all this? He continues, "because
234 the *love* of God is shed abroad in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."
235 [Rom. v. 3-5.]

236 Love can do all things; "charity never faileth;" he that has the will, has the power. You
237 will say, "But is not the will itself from God? and, therefore, is it not after all *His* doing,
238 not ours, if we have *not* the will?" Doubtless, by nature, our will is in bondage; we
239 cannot will good; but by the grace of God our will has been set free; we obtain again, to
240 a certain extent, the gift of free-will; henceforth, we can will, or not will. If we will, it is
241 doubtless from God's grace, who gave us the power to will, and to Him be the praise;
242 but it is from ourselves too, because we have used that power which God gave. God
243 enables us to will and to do; by nature we cannot will, but by grace we can; and now if
244 we do not will, we are the cause of the defect. What can Almighty Mercy do for us which
245 He hath not done? "He has given *all* things which pertain to life and godliness;" and we,
246 in consequence, can "make our calling and election sure," as the holy men of God did of

247 old time. Ah, how do those ancient Saints put us to shame! how were they "out of
248 weakness made strong," how "waxed" they "valiant in fight," and became as Angels
249 upon earth instead of men! And why?—because they had a heart to contemplate, to
250 design, to *will* great things. Doubtless, in many respects, we all are but men to the end;
251 we hunger, we thirst, we need sustenance, we need sleep, we need society, we need
252 instruction, we need encouragement, we need example; yet who can say the heights to
253 which in time men can proceed in all things, who beginning by little and little, yet in the
254 distance shadow forth great things? "Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch
255 forth the curtains of thine habitations; spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy
256 stakes; for thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left ... Fear not; for thou
257 shalt not be ashamed; neither shalt thou be confounded, for thou shalt not be put to
258 shame ...In righteousness shalt thou be established; thou shalt be far from oppression,
259 for thou shalt not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near thee ... This is the
260 heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of Me, saith the Lord."
261 [Isa. liv. 2-4, 14, 17.]

262 High words like these relate in the first place to the Church, but doubtless they are also
263 fulfilled in their measure in each of her true children. But we sit coldly and sluggishly at
264 home; we fold our hands and cry "a little more slumber;" we shut our eyes, we cannot
265 see things afar off, we cannot "see the land which is very far off;" we do not understand
266 that Christ calls us after Him; we do not hear the voice of His heralds in the wilderness;
267 we have not the heart to go forth to Him who multiplies the loaves, and feeds us by
268 every word of His mouth. Other children of Adam have before now done in His strength
269 what we put aside. We fear to be too holy. Others put us to shame; all around us, others
270 are doing what we will not. Others are entering deeper into the kingdom of heaven than
271 we. Others are fighting against their enemies more truly and bravely. The unlettered, the
272 ungifted, the young, the weak and simple, with sling and stones from the brook, are
273 encountering Goliath, as having on divine armour. The Church is rising up around us
274 day by day towards heaven, and we do nothing but object, or explain away, or criticise,
275 or make excuses, or wonder. We fear to cast in our lot with the Saints, lest we become
276 a party; we fear to seek the strait gate, lest we be of the few not the many. Oh may we
277 be loyal and affectionate before our race is run! Before our sun goes down in the grave,
278 oh may we learn somewhat more of what the Apostle calls the love of Christ which
279 passeth knowledge, and catch some of the rays of love which come from Him!
280 Especially at the season of the year now approaching, when Christ calls us into the
281 wilderness, let us gird up our loins and fearlessly obey the summons. Let us take up our
282 cross and follow Him. Let us take to us "the whole armour of God, that we may be able
283 to stand against the wiles of the devil; for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but
284 against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world,
285 against spiritual wickedness in high places; wherefore, take unto you the whole armour
286 of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand."

END OF VOLUME V.

Note

Quinquagesima.