

# POWER AND THE CHRISTIAN

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## Introduction to the Study: Dynamics of Power

As Christians, we are richly steeped in lessons about servanthood. Stories of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and of Jesus coming down from heaven to take on human flesh paint a beautiful picture of what it means to be a Christian. We understand that we are called to serve others. What we have less instruction in is how to live as persons with power and how that informs servanthood. How are we to wield power in appropriate, gospel-directed ways? No problem, you say, because you don't have any power to wield? That's not true. Whether you are a boss, supervisor, teacher, coach, pastor, deacon, PTA president, Bible study leader, or parent, you have power.

One reason we haven't studied the dynamics of power as much is because the word itself prompts images and emotions that are often negative. People just aren't comfortable talking about power; it's such a loaded word. "Power" simply means having the ability to influence the behavior of another person. As children, we did school homework whether it made sense to us or not, because the teacher was the one in authority—she had the power. On the athletic team, we ran laps because a coach said to do so. When a parent sat us in the corner for punishment, we sat there. As adults, when supervisors give us an overload of work, we may quietly grumble, but we usually do what is asked if we want to keep our jobs. They have the power of the paycheck.

We are also persons with power in the lives of others. *We* are the parent punishing a child, the church teacher handing out praise to children who memorize scripture passages, the coach ordering the running of laps, and for some of us, the supervisor who controls the work-life and compensation of others. We have power.

We wrote this study in the belief that power exists in relationships, whether we recognize it or not, much like anger or affection or the other characteristics of a relationship. We also believe that it's time we reclaim the word "power" and examine how

it can be a personal resource used for the good of others and for the protection of vulnerable persons.

For example, as parents and teachers, we can use our power to encourage children's creativity and self-discipline rather than to humiliate them for shortcomings. As supervisors, we can use our power to provide the resources and guidance employees need to excel rather than threatening or punishing them for poor performance. We can speak kindly and offer to show the person bagging our groceries how to protect fragile items rather than complaining to the manager if he smashes the bread under the potatoes.

In this study, we are looking carefully at what it means to be a person with power because of a status or role (e.g., parent, pastor, customer) as well as one with power because of earned respect or esteem by others (e.g., popular group member, trusted mentor), and how we are to handle power responsibly in our relationships with others in ways that please God. We will also look at biblical examples of how to confront abuses of power, and why it is so difficult for us to do.

Our underlying text for this study is Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Whether we hold the highest office in the company or the land or we hold no job at all, this verse is our commonality, our great equalizer. We are fallen and broken people; we all make mistakes and poor choices. Having power does not make us immune from human fallibility; some would argue it gives our weaknesses and selfishness more opportunity to flourish. How then do we handle the power we have with humility and grace, mindful too that Jesus warned, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'" (Luke 14:11)? Scripture shows us that we can be Christ-like as persons in authority and also become "the servant of all."

This study grew out of what we have learned in research on clergy sexual misconduct with adults conducted by the Baylor University School of Social Work.<sup>1</sup> In that study, we learned that Christians do not understand or talk much about power as a characteristic of human relations. Nor do they discuss the responsibilities and privileges that come with relationship power. Misunderstanding and ignoring power in our life together create the opportunity for abuse to happen in all the places Christian find themselves—at home, at work, in the community, and even in our congregations. More positively, we need to learn to accept and use the power that we have in the ways that will bring honor and glory to the One who has the ultimate power, forever and ever.

### **Using this resource**

Biblical teachings and stories can inform Christians about the dynamics of power and can help us use power in relationships in ways that are respectful of others, healthy, appropriate and bear witness to God's ultimate power as demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. We hope you will adapt this resource to fit your own educational needs. We suggest the following possibilities.

1. *Sermon Background.* No teaching has greater impact on Christian congregations than the words of the pastor's sermon Sunday by Sunday. We welcome your use of this material as background for sermon preparation.
2. *Bible Study Group.* We originally prepared this resource with Bible study groups in mind. The study is designed to work best if each class participant has a lesson booklet. Each biblical story selects a passage for class study and also provides

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<sup>1</sup> This project was supported by generous funding from the Ford Foundation, the JES Schmidt Foundation, and the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. For more information about this study, see [www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct](http://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct)

3. background material and context to inform the discussion, and we recommend it be read before coming to class. In each lesson, reflection questions are included to direct the conversation, but we encourage the class to let the emerging discussion prompt new or additional questions.
4. *Individual Study.* We also recognize that you may simply read this for your own study. If you do so, take time to consider the reflection questions. It may help to keep a journal of your thoughts and reactions.

However you use this material, we welcome your feedback. We plan to revise the material based on what we learn from others about how best to help Christians and congregations wrestle with the use of power.<sup>2</sup>

The following chapters are based on four biblical stories that can help us examine our own relationships. After this introduction, we begin with the story of Jesus welcoming children. Second, we will study the life of Esther, a story that on the face of it is about the use and abuse of power in communities and governments, but that has far-reaching implications for our own lives. Third, the story of Eli and Samuel has interesting application to adult-child relationships, such as teacher-student, parent-child, and coach-athlete. Fourth, the story of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba is a story not just of societal leadership but also of leadership in religious communities, since David was the king appointed by God. The final lesson explores how we can please God in how we use and respond to power.

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<sup>2</sup> Send feedback to [Vicki\\_Kabat@baylor.edu](mailto:Vicki_Kabat@baylor.edu) or to Vicki Kabat, Baylor School of Social Work, 1 Bear Place, P.O. Box 97320, Waco, TX 76798.

## Lesson One: Putting Little Ones First

### *Introduction to the Lesson:*

Introduce the lesson today by asking the class to participate in this word association exercise. Say the following words aloud, one at a time, and ask class members to respond with the first word that comes to their minds:

- power
- service
- leadership

What are the differences and/or similarities you see in the three words? Does one connote more negative or positive associations than another? Explore the reasons for that.

### *Study Scripture:*

*Mark 9:33-37: <sup>33</sup> Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" <sup>34</sup> But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. <sup>36</sup> Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (NRSV)<sup>3</sup>*

*What does a Christian do with power?*

Power. We might as well admit it, we want it. We want others to listen to us and follow our advice. We want others to look up to us and do what we want them to do. We want to be able to control our world so that we can get what we need and what we want.

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<sup>3</sup>This study will use the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

Even the Twelve who walked physically alongside Jesus and heard his instruction face-to-face, hung back to argue about who would be the greatest, but then “were silent” when Jesus questioned them. Too often we equate being “great” with having power—power to influence and “control” other people and the world around us. It can be a disciple wanting to be considered “great,” which meant getting to be Jesus’ right-hand-man when Jesus becomes ruler of the world (see Matt 20:20-23). But it also can be as simple as the rush of success we feel when a fussy baby goes to sleep in our arms because we had the “power” to calm.

This passage from Matthew is about welcoming children, but it is about so much more. Jesus was talking to the disciples about power, about how to order their lives with one another, but pay close attention and we see that Jesus also models this teaching. Read Mark 9:30-32, and we learn what happened just before this walk down the road and the disciples’ discussion of greatness. Jesus had been telling them again that he was going to die and be raised from death. It would be the grand finale of his earthly ministry, when he would demonstrate what greatness - what true power - is. But the disciples did not understand—and they were afraid to ask him. So instead they started dreaming their own images of the grand finale.

From the way they were talking, it would include trumpets and royal robes—and power. They completely lost touch with what Jesus had been saying to them. They started arguing instead about who among them was the greatest.

I’d love to know the criteria they used for defining greatness. Was it who did the best job of healing? Who could sway listeners best? Who could raise the most money for the cause? So Jesus tries again to teach them. It was in this context of trying to teach the disciples how to be great—how to be the church—that Jesus brings a little one, a nobody, into their very center and tells the disciples, “If you want to be great, if you want to welcome

God into your lives, then be servants, seek out and care for the nobodies.” Children represent the smallest, the least powerful, in their society and in ours.

*Time to Reflect:*

1. In addition to children, who are the “nobodies” in our lives today? How do we interact with them? How does our church interact with them?
2. An outreach committee member was telling the others on the committee about a visitor to the church named John Jackson: “He’s a doctor and has a big home over on Woodall. He’s just the kind of member we want!” What is your reaction to this statement?
3. What are some of the ways that having power defines who we are? What are the pros and cons of this association?

*Power as service to others*

Still, the disciples did not understand. Read Chapter 10, verse 13-14. It was just a short time later, and people were bringing little children to Jesus for his blessing, and again the disciples try to shut out the children. The disciples are still saying, “We have important business to be about; don’t bother us with children.” The disciples did not understand—or did not *want* to understand--that greatness for Jesus was reaching out for the shut out, for the powerless.

According to Jesus, if you want to know God, to see God, then bring the nobodies in this world to the center of what you do. Rather than using your power to benefit yourself, use it to serve and benefit others. Order your community life as Christians by protecting and caring for those most at risk from others abusing their power.

Not only do we need to listen to Jesus’ words in this passage and order our lives by them, but Jesus’ actions are also a model for us. Clearly, Jesus had power in the lives of the



disciples. They listened to him; they followed him. Their thick-headedness was a disappointment to him, and yet he *used* his power to help them understand, to help them live more effectively. Jesus did not shrug his shoulders and mutter under his breath about the density of their skulls. He may have felt anger at them for not trying harder to understand, but he did not lash out at them in impatience and frustration. He did not give up on them or try to humiliate them by belittling their petty vying for the honor of being the greatest.

Instead of nursing his own feelings by blasting them with well-deserved frustration, Jesus focused on what his followers needed as students. Earlier, he had been giving them predictions about the future and they did not understand, so now he gives them an object lesson in the present. He takes a different approach, not talking about what would come at the end but instead about the child right here in front of them now. Jesus taught them about power and greatness, using not only the example of the child but also by being an example in how he used his own power to care for and instruct them.

#### *Time to Reflect*

- What positions of power or of authority do you have? List the ones mentioned so that all can see the variety and breadth of roles. When have you been the subordinate in a powered relationship? What was good or bad about that role?
- One of the most powerful leaders in the Bible was Moses, and yet read how the Bible describes him: “Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers “12:3). How are power and humility related?

#### *Closing:*

Read the following passage aloud and then ask class members to reflect on it by comparing it to the passage at the beginning of this lesson:

“Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4)

## Lesson two: Esther – Orphan Girl to Queen

### *Introduction to the Lesson:*

Read the following quotes aloud. Do you agree with the statement? Why or why not?

Can you think of situations where the statement does apply and when it does not?

“An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens.” - Thomas Jefferson

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” – Lord Acton

“Ultimately, the only power to which man should aspire is that which he exercises over himself.” – Eli Wiesel

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### *Study Scripture:*

Esther 3:13: Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

### *Surprise endings*

The Book of Esther would make a great movie of the week! It is full of evil plots, extravagant lifestyles, beautiful women, a ruthless king, political uprisings, assassination attempts, and war – and the underdog triumphs in the end. This short book in the Old Testament is also rich with examples of the dynamics of power, and is our starting point for our study. Before continuing, read the Book of Esther.

In life we never know how our personal story is going to play out or what opportunities may come our way to use our positional power to benefit others. That was certainly true for Esther, a young orphan girl raised by her cousin Mordecai and living in

Susa after her people, the Jews, were exiled from Jerusalem. Her status in that society could not have been much lower – orphan, exile, female. Her story, however, would unfold and enmesh her in power plays at the highest level of political and military power – the court of Persian ruler King Ashasuerus, also known as King Xerxes I.

*Power, power, who has the power?*

Let's take a few minutes to look at the main characters in the Book of Esther and how they used their positions of power – or lack of them – and to what effect.

*Vashti refuses the King*

Although a lesser character in the narrative, Queen Vashti is the first in the story to assert her power by refusing the king's summons to a banquet. He wants to show off her great beauty, but the purpose offends and demeans Vashti. It's one of the few examples in the book of anyone directly questioning King Xerxes' unlimited power – and she pays a heavy price for it, divorce and banishment.

*The fickle King Xerxes*

This monarch does little to endear himself to readers – or anyone in his kingdom. He makes decisions rashly and emotionally, giving little thought to the consequences of his own decrees. He asks no one's counsel except those who panders to him. He has unlimited power and is accountable to no one. He manages to abuse his power so frequently and so callously that he provides us the perfect counterpoint in our study of power. How should one use a position of power to serve others? Do everything the opposite of what Xerxes did!

### *Mordecai behind the scenes*

At the beginning of this story, Mordecai is a Jewish slave who sits at the king's gate, but he seems to have his finger on the pulse of the kingdom. He sends for Esther when the king is looking for a new queen; he advises her not to reveal her ethnicity to the king; he refuses to bow to the haughty Haman and elicits his wrath and ultimately, the king's decree to slaughter the Jews: later he beseeches Esther to intervene with the king on behalf of their people. For one with so little positional power, Mordecai uses his innate abilities and cunning extremely well to achieve his purposes.

### *Esther, the orphan girl*

Of all our characters Esther is the only one who enters the story with no agenda to gain power. She is quietly living out her life of servitude as a Jewish slave when she, and 100 other virgins, is plucked from her life and made contestants in the King's Great Beauty Pageant. When Xerxes chooses her, Esther begins a roller-coaster ride of political intrigue and machinations. Her cousin Mordecai uses his power as her childhood guardian to elicit her help; Haman preens in her presence at the first banquet believing that, by association, she endows him with even greater power in the court; and the King, seemingly bewitched by her beauty, is putty in her hands and abdicates all his power to her. Indeed, Esther is a cunning girl as she plays these befuddled men off of one another to save her people.

### *Haughty Haman Has a Hissy*

Some people can never have enough power, and Haman is a perfect example. He is promoted by the king to become his right-hand person, but Haman wants more! He wants everyone to bow to him, and manipulates the king into decreeing such. Really! Has the king nothing better to do? But Mordecai has none of it. Furious, Haman again plays the king like a

cheap, tinny piano – but this time the song becomes a dirge as the king decrees the annihilation of all Mordecai’s people. To his dying breath – on the gallows he had ordered built for Mordecai – Haman is plotting and conniving to save his own skin and line his own pocket. Haman is another example in this narrative of the many ways “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton).

#### *Time to Reflect*

- Which of the characters outlined above do you relate to the most and why?
- Based on these profiles and your reading of the Book of Esther, give specific examples of power misused and power used to serve others. What were the costs involved in either example?
- Discuss the concept of “checks and balances” and how it might have been applied in this story. Where do you see it applied today?

#### *Esther’s Use of Power*

Esther’s leadership gives us a sharp contrast to that of Haman and the king. Esther uses her power unselfishly and with humility, becoming an advocate for life and justice for her people. When she finds herself in a position of leadership, she rises to the occasion, putting self interest aside and taking a courageous leap into action that could have cost her everything.

Courage is not the absence of fear; it is choosing to act in behalf of what is right even when we are terrified of what might result. At this time, the opportunity for action belongs to her alone. Yet, young as she is, she is wise enough to take time to prepare herself spiritually and to ask others to support her with a time of prayer and discernment. Only then does she act.

Esther's leadership demonstrates another aspect of power of which we need to be mindful: even the best leader's instincts can change depending on the situation. Esther is courageous and exercises selfless leadership when she makes her request of Xerxes. Yet, only moments after that shining example, she acts mercilessly and vengefully when Haman begs her for his life. She could have spoken up for him at that moment, but she does not. She now has the power and she chooses to use it ruthlessly. She not only has Haman hanged, but also his 10 sons.

#### *Time to Reflect*

It would be easy – and make a happier ending to our Movie of the Week – if we could paint Esther with broad saintly strokes. For the most part, we can, and certainly we can in contrast to the King and Haman. But then, having saved her people, something shifts for her.

- Can you think of an example from your own life when, from your position of power, you acted selflessly and another time selfishly? What changed in each circumstance to compel your choices?
- What are the temptations, personally and culturally, that drive either choice?

#### *We are all human*

What drove these individuals to act as they did? The same things that drive us: ego needs, situational exigencies, greed, pride – we all carry with us quite a laundry list of “stuff,” most of which we wouldn't want to broadcast publicly. We do know that wielding power unwisely often evolves out of the misconception that because I have power, then I am more deserving than others; because I have power, my needs and my life must be more important than the lives of others. Haman and Xerxes may have had no personal identity

other than what they believed their position gave them, so they had to protect the authority of their positions at all costs—including costing the lives of those they were supposed to serve as leaders.

Most of the time, Mordecai and Esther's motives were quite different. Both used the power they had with courage, putting their own lives at risk, in behalf of their people.

The story of Esther exemplifies the many ways people can use power and provides a mirror for examining how we make choices when we have power to influence the lives and wellbeing of others as well as of ourselves.

*What we can learn about our power?*

In many ways, Haman was very human; he wanted people to look up to him, and Mordecai's slight sent him into a rage. Xerxes had made a law that his words could not be revoked; he could surely have revoked both the law and the words, but then he would have had to admit he was wrong, and none of us wants to admit our errors. We all can relate to these feelings and motives. What makes this story a powerful word to us is that those human needs were combined with power over the lives of others. With that combination comes the possibility of doing great good—or great evil. When in a position of power that can influence others, we have to find a way to put our personal needs aside, to gain perspective from outside our own self-centeredness, in order to make decisions that consider the wellbeing of all who might be affected.

How then do we overcome our base natures to exercise our power in a way that honors God? Esther and Mordecai had all the same human needs that trapped Xerxes and Haman into decisions that abused their power. The difference is that Esther and Mordecai had God and one another to turn to. They sought God's will first, and then sought the advice of each other. They prayed, and then they planned. They could trust an all-powerful God to be concerned about their wellbeing and lead them to be accountable for the wellbeing of



others. With that as their priority, they could set aside their personal need for external validations of self worth and operate on behalf of those most in need.

Christ says the greatest commandment is to love God and to love neighbor. We cannot will ourselves not to be concerned about our own wellbeing. We can only be aware of it, and ask God to give us new vision beyond our own needs, to embrace the power we have and to use it for good in the lives of others. We can entrust to God our insecurities and fears, and ask God to use us as instruments of God's will in the lives of others. Entrusting ourselves to God frees us to do "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).

*Closing:*

Reflect on these statements in silent prayer.

"The main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed."

— Barbara Brown Taylor<sup>4</sup>

"Many of us are after our own ends, and Jesus Christ cannot help Himself to our lives. If we are abandoned to Jesus, we have no ends of our own to serve." —

Oswald Chambers<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Barbara B. 2009. *An Altar in the World*, p. 90. New York: HarperOne.

<sup>5</sup> Chambers, Oswald, 1935. *My Utmost for His Highest*. (February 24). Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing Inc.

## Lesson Three: Eli and Samuel

### *Introduction to the Lesson*

Watch the Video Clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL9k2pTFYrE&feature=related>  
(Clarinet Scene in Mr. Holland's Opus).

### *Share:*

- Considering the movie clip, can you think of a time when you felt a teacher either encouraged or discouraged you in your learning?
- How did each make you feel?
- Do you have an experience where you were the teacher or coach and chose to be an encourager?

### *Scripture Study*

1 Samuel 3:9-11: Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

### *Eli mentors Samuel*

Hannah prayed fervently that God would bless her with a child and God did in the birth of her son, Samuel. Once the child was weaned, Hannah kept her promise to God and took the small child to the temple to leave him in the care of Eli, the priest (1 Samuel 1:1-2:11). This is where we will pick up the Old Testament story as we examine the relationship between Samuel, the student, and Eli, his teacher.

The relationship of student/teacher or athlete/coach is full of opportunity to shape and mold young people in ways that will sustain and nourish them for a lifetime. Despite his failings as a parent to his own sons Eli provides us a good model of adult mentoring in his relationship with Samuel.

### *Samuel's restless night*

Like their father, Eli's sons, Phineas and Hophni, were priests in the temple, but they were abusive and disgraceful leaders. They were having sex with the women who served at the meeting tent (1 Samuel 2:22), and they were taking the best portions of the sacrifices offered to God for themselves (1 Samuel 2:11-17). These boys were seriously out of control. As a consequence, God's judgment fell on Eli; whether this was judgment on Eli's poor parenting or whether it indicated that Eli had participated in his sons' sins is not clear. God vowed to end Eli's line, and the young boy Samuel became an unwitting instrument in fulfilling this dour promise (1 Samuel 2:30-33).

One night, as Samuel lay sleeping, he awoke to a voice calling his name. Thinking that it was the voice of Eli, Samuel went to him, but Eli said he had not called him. When Samuel heard the voice a second time, the old priest realized that it was God calling Samuel. He told the boy that if he heard the voice calling him again to say, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:3-9).

Eli was a broken, old man whose sons had bitterly disappointed him. His attitude toward young Samuel could have reflected this disappointment. Think of the ways Eli might have responded out of fear or jealousy:

- He could have dismissed Samuel's reports of hearing a voice calling him
- He could have refused to tell Samuel that it was God calling him
- He could have gone with Samuel, hoping that God would speak to him instead of to the boy
- He could have silenced the boy to keep him from supplanting his own sons.

Nevertheless, God trusted Eli to be the spiritual father to young Samuel, who needed Eli to hear God and instruct him. Eli did not disappoint God in this moment; he uses his

position of power selflessly, to guide and serve. Eli recognized that God was working in the life of Samuel in a way that did not involve him — and he encouraged Samuel to listen. Eli stayed in his own place and sent Samuel back to his sleeping mat. In essence, he blessed Samuel by encouraging him to step into *his* own moment, trusting God and Samuel to communicate with one another.

*Time to Reflect:*

In some ways, Eli reminds us of David; despite having erred in many serious ways, God still chose these two men to carry out important missions. What an encouragement that is to us!

- Many of us have roles of power in children's lives as teachers, coaches, Scout leaders, Sunday School teachers and the like. How do you prepare for that role? Recount a time you felt you impacted a young life in a positive way and in a negative way?

*A messenger bearing bad news*

The next morning Eli called Samuel in for a report on what God had said to him during the night. It must have been with trepidation that Eli asked this question, knowing God's displeasure with him. Young Samuel also must have been shaking in his sandals, because he did not have a good word to report to the priest. When Samuel revealed to Eli the judgment against him, Eli did not even become angry with Samuel. Instead, he told Samuel that the Lord can do as the Lord pleases. He humbled himself and affirmed Samuel.

People who use their power wisely trust others, not just themselves, to have a piece of the truth, even when that truth is not welcome or comfortable. As we know, Samuel eventually became the man who anointed Saul, the first king of Israel, and later, David, the

most famous king of Israel. Eli saw none of this happen, but he was instrumental in being the bridge God needed for Samuel.

From this story of Samuel's childhood, Eli and Samuel help us to learn about healthy teacher-student relationships. Samuel spent his life leading Israel but Eli died in grief over the death of his own sons and the loss of the ark of God to the Philistines. We do not remember Eli's death, however, nearly as well as we do his words to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears'" (1 Sam. 3:9). Even those with deeply flawed and broken lives can serve as leaders to others, if they are able to put aside their own failures and disappointments and focus on the wellbeing of those whom they influence. Eli laid the bridge into the future for Samuel, even though he did not get to walk it with him. Using a position of power wisely recognizes that the focus is not on our personal lives, or about building our own reputations or prestige. Using power and influence well is about guiding others into a future we cannot see.

*Time to Reflect:*

- Other than your parents, who was the adult in your life as a child/youth who encouraged and affirmed you the most? Share about this relationship and what it meant to you growing up and now as an adult.
- Break into small groups of two or three and make a list of the qualities you believe a teacher or coach should have. Make a list of the qualities you believe they should not have. Discuss the two lists in relation to your own powered relationships (at work, church, in committees, etc.)

*Closing:*

Paul and Timothy had a mentor/mentee relationship in the Bible. Paul refers to him as “my true child in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2). Below are some of the instructions Paul gives to Timothy (1 Timothy, 4). Reflect on these and the implications they have for your life.

- Train yourself in godliness
- Have your hope set on the living God
- Command and teach these things
- Let no one despise your youth
- Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity
- Do not neglect the gift you have

## Lesson Four: David and Bathsheba

### *Introduction to the Lesson*

Watch the following movie clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um-t-nuDH8I&feature=related>

(From minute 3 until the end)

- How is Bathsheba portrayed?
- Does David grapple with moral issues and if so, does he resolve them?
- Does the relationship between David and Bathsheba appear to be consensual?

### *Study Scripture*

2 Samuel 11:1-2: In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.

### *Our many images of David*

David is a man of passion and deeply felt emotions. He represents the best and the worst of all of us. He reminds us of the old nursery saying, "When he was good, he was very good, but when he was bad he was horrid." He is, then, one of the best examples we can examine in our study of power and the subtle ways it can turn the best of us into people capable of doing horrible things.

Think of all our images of David.

*The boy David confronts Goliath:* Going up against the mighty Goliath with a slingshot and five smooth stones, David is disadvantaged in every circumstance but one – his total trust in God. And with that great spiritual power, he slays the giant.

*David, the Young Shepherd:* Roaming the hillsides with his flock, his staff and his lyre, young David writes and sings poetry unmatched in its beauty, resonance and meaning.

*David, the friend of Jonathan:* Here are two young men who become great friends. They grow into maturity together until politics come crashing into their world and would have them be adversaries. Jonathan's father, King Saul, becomes jealous of David's military prowess and turns on David.

Here is where we take up our specific study of David. At this point he has been victorious in military battles, he reigns securely and popularly over his people, he is ensconced in luxury and plentitude in the palace, and then, one day, his gaze falls upon Bathsheba.

### *Fact versus fiction*

Hollywood has given us a great love story of these two, as depicted by Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward. But if you reread the story, you won't find much there to support this romanticized depiction. As co-authors Diana and David Garland say:

"The result of his gaze, however, is clear and disastrous. The look led to desire; desire to intent; intent to pursuit; and pursuit to deed. Bathsheba was the victim of a man with authority, the leader of his people, abusing his power... . David was



violating his covenant responsibility as the God-ordained king of the nation” (p. 158).<sup>6</sup>

Herein lies one of the great duplicities of power, both for the one who possesses it and for those who idolize the one with power: it deceives both parties equally. Let’s stay focused on David first. Not only has he risen to be the military leader of his country, he is also its spiritual leader. His people adore him. He has freed them from the tyranny of opposing nations, he is “most favored of God,” he seemingly is all things to all people. Not one person could say a bad word against him. Let’s face it, things are sweet for David! And as most of us would, he begins to believe his own good press. With that arrogance there comes a subtle shift from full reliance upon God to increasing reliance on individual capacity.

We’ve been there. We excel at a project at work and our supervisors praise us loudly in staff meetings. We chair the stewardship campaign at church and the coffers overflow and suddenly everyone is slapping us on the back and exulting over our giftedness. It’s hard to stay humble in these situations. If everyone believes we are amazing, why then, we must be! How quickly we forget who gives us the abundance, creativity and skill, and for what purpose. We are fickle lovers, easily seduced away from our first love by self-adoration.

*Time to Reflect:*

Fame or being held in high regard is heady business, and full of temptations.

- Discuss the difference between self-esteem and pride. Is one possible without the other?
- What is the meaning of humility? How do you keep yourself humble?

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<sup>6</sup> Garland, David E. and Diana R., 2007. “Flawed Families of the Bible: How God’s Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships.” Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

### *Arrogance and entitlement*

Furthermore, when David – or any of us – rises to a position of power, we tend to have fewer and fewer people to hold us accountable. We grow irritable when anyone questions us. Soon, no one voices a contrary opinion for fear of being banished. Think of political leaders in contemporary times who have chosen this route.

With this arrogance and self-reliance often comes a sense of entitlement. I “deserve” this or that. I’ve “earned” it. “No one has the right to question me about this.” Most of us are well-versed in such rationalizations. When David spots the beautiful Bathsheba, wife of faithful soldier and countryman Uriah, bathing on the roof, he wants her. Period. He evidently doesn’t think much beyond his own lust, and he acts to immediately satisfy that lust. Bathsheba is brought to him, David rapes her, and then sends her away.

In the study we did on Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults, we see a similar pattern. Religious leaders who seduce a member of their congregation were adept at rationalizing their actions, often invoking God as an accomplice: “You have been sent to me as my spiritual helpmate”; “Our love pleases God”; “I need your love in order to fulfill my responsibilities to this congregation.”

One victim told us that the pastor who abused her was a high-ranking official in their denomination, held many important civic positions, and had met with presidents. “People excused his actions by saying ‘he’s just a man,’” she said, as though all of us don’t have sexual appetites but somehow can’t control them. “But he’s not just a man,” she said. “He’s a man of God, and that’s different.”

David was a man of God, but he had let the delusions of power take him away from his first love, and in so doing, he betrayed his God, his people, Bathsheba, Uriah and himself.

*Time to Reflect:*

- List examples of when we can feel entitled (e.g., a student may feel entitled to get a good grade, an employee may feel entitled to get an annual raise, etc.).
- What are the pros and cons of instant self-gratification?

*A question of false idols*

Now let's address the temptation that comes when we idolize those in power.

*Power and the Christian, 2009 © Baylor University School of Social Work*

Whether it's a president or a pastor, we are usually quick to imbue a person in power with superhuman characteristics. Like the Israelites of old, we beg for judges and kings. We expect impossible capabilities from our leaders, and we invest great emotional capital into believing they should be infallible and wholly trustworthy. Even the betrayals of recent past presidents have not totally dissuaded us from this mind-set.

We need to ask ourselves why that is the case. It may simply be that as a group we are lazy. If someone else is in charge, then we don't have to be. If our pastor is our spiritual leader, then we can absolve ourselves of the responsibility of working out our own salvation with fear and trembling. The pastor has "the" relationship with God, not us; we're just passive observers of the process, satisfied with any byproducts that may come our way.

It also may be the corporately held belief that we don't know what's best and so we should not question the one in power, i.e., "he's the expert on this." Or it may be a gentility we possess that tells us it is rude to question a person in authority. We want to err on the side of grace, not judgment. There's nothing wrong with that, until someone becomes graceless in his or her abuse of power. Jesus was not a wimp nor was he someone to turn a blind eye to injustice – just the opposite.

This kind of blind acquiescence enables those in power to abuse their position. We feed their egos – glossing over what is often their significant insecurities – and put them on a pedestal. But life on a pedestal is very lonely. There is no one the leader can go to and trust to hear his insecurities, doubts, and fears.

*Power and the Christian, 2009 © Baylor University School of Social Work*

Left alone to struggle with his inner demons, he or she can turn increasingly to any one who seems to understand and sympathizes with him. It's a vicious cycle, and we cannot discount our part in keeping it spinning.

*Time to reflect:*

- Who were your idols when you were a youth? Who are your children's or grandchildren's idols today?
- As a democracy, Americans believe in the participation of its citizens in governance. In the last general election, there was a higher voter turnout than in many previous ones. What do you think moves individuals from passive observation to active participation?

*Who then is responsible?*

How, then, do we hold a person in power accountable? The authors of the American Constitution had the right idea: checks and balances, limited terms of service, representatives of, by and for the people. Most corporations have boards of directors, annual audits, external accountants – and all are designed to hold executives accountable. Unfortunately, many churches do not have such a system. Some are governed only by individual conscience, or by denominational structure far removed from the immediate

congregation. Who holds your congregational leaders accountable? Do you have a responsibility to do so?

In David's betrayal of Bathsheba's trust in him as her governmental and spiritual leader, he followed his physical violation of Bathsheba with subterfuge and betrayal of her husband, Uriah, leading to his death on the battlefield. What a wicked web we weave when first we practice to deceive.

But there is one person in the land who dares to question David: the prophet Nathan. ***Stop here and read 2 Samuel: 1-12.***

Cleverly using a tale of a dear little lamb, who was "like a daughter" to its owner, that was led to slaughter, Nathan hits upon an analogy close to the shepherd's heart. In righteous indignation, David demands to know who this despicable man is and that he be put to death, only to learn from Nathan, it is himself. Stricken with recognition of the evil he has done, David confesses the words we all must confess at some point: "I have sinned against God." David cannot escape the consequences of his choices: the son borne of his raping Bathsheba dies.

*Who is the Nathan among us?*

God used prophets throughout the Old Testament to warn the people of their wrongdoing, and a more thankless job there never was! No one liked the prophets, no one wanted to hear what they had to say, and often they met inglorious ends. They brought "hard truths" for the people to hear. But God's purpose in sending a warning through the prophets was to save the people from their own destructive tendencies. The prophets brought merciful and loving admonitions, if only the people would listen and repent, turn back to their first love and devotion to Yahweh.

Who among us will speak the hard truth, regardless of the personal consequence? Are we abandoned to God's love to the point that we selflessly act in the best interest of the community, and not solely of ourselves? Is our relationship so centered on God that we can discern truth and speak up for it?

These are hard questions, and even a spiritual powerhouse such as David failed the test. Nevertheless, David learned from his failures and he repented. David and Bathsheba's second son, Solomon, became one of the great fathers of our faith.

*Closing:*

Two of the common themes that allowed the misconduct in the congregation to occur found in our study<sup>7</sup> were that people 1) ignored the warning signs and 2) they they didn't think it was appropriate to say anything. These same themes are found in our lesson today. As you close in reflection, consider whether or not you have a responsibility or what it is when you see inappropriate conduct at work or church.

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<sup>7</sup> Clergy Sexual Misconduct with adults, School of Social Work, Baylor University, 2009.

## **Lesson Five: When Our Use of Power Pleases God**

In our culture, we are taught at an early age that the acquisition of power is a good and worthy goal in life. Having power is equated with being successful in the corporate and political worlds, but also in other realms — in the local PTA, on athletic fields, in church and denominational committees, in the small office or the international enterprise. Power is even considered a virtue and a value and, inherent in the position is the universally accepted (if not practiced) tenet that with power one will exercise wisdom and act on behalf of those over whom he or she has authority. The theory goes that if one is smart enough to rise to power, then that person can be trusted. Sadly, having power and being trustworthy and wise are not always correlated.

As Christians, the biblical instruction we receive about the wise use of power is scarce, over-generalized or nonexistent. One theme throughout the Old and New Testaments, though, is that as God's people we are called to one thing: to love God with all our heart, mind and body. Stubborn and selfish people that we are, however, it has always been too hard of a commandment for us to obey, and we have failed miserably at it. We would rather make up our own rules (the Garden of Eden), elect our own officials to obey (the judges and kings), follow our own paths (the Prodigal Son), or any number of options rather than follow this one and supreme commandment. G.K. Chesterson said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."<sup>8</sup> Even in the face of our selfish demands, God sometimes has granted us our desire. "Be careful what you pray for" takes on new meaning! God allowed the covenant people to have judges and kings, and among those chosen, God gave favor to those who honored God. At other times, God called upon one person or another – often someone with little or no position or

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<sup>8</sup> Chesterton, G. K., Chapter 5, *What's Wrong With The World*, 1910.

authority – to act “at such a time as this,” as we see when we study the Book of Esther. The Spirit moves in the heart and spirit of individuals at different times and in different ways to compel a person to right a wrong, to advocate for the poor and disenfranchised, to care for the orphans and widows. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

### *The wise use of power in the Scriptures*

We can agree that all of us at one time or another are in positions of authority. How then are we to act in these positions? What characteristics of a person in authority does God honor? There are many examples of persons abusing power; what are the scriptural examples of individuals using power wisely? We do not have to look far for our examples.

**David** — For many years, David led the Israelites well, in ways that greatly pleased God. Chosen by God from the sheep pens, God made him shepherd of God’s people. Psalm 78:72 tells us, “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.” In other references, David’s qualities as leader are described as faithful, righteous and upright in heart (1Kings 3:6).

**Solomon**—David’s son, Solomon, also finds favor with God, so much so that God appears to him in a dream and tells Solomon, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon does not ask for wealth or long life or victory over his enemies; he humbles himself before God, saying, “Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?” (1 Kings 3:5-9)

**Nehemiah**—When Nehemiah, an exiled cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, learns that the Jewish remnant in Judah is in great trouble and disgrace, that the wall of Jerusalem has been destroyed, he is heartsick. He weeps and mourns for days, fasting and praying to God



in preparation to go before the king and ask that he be allowed to return to his homeland to rebuild the wall. All of the book of Nehemiah serves as an excellent example of how a person can be called, enabled and equipped by God to lead with authority and wisdom despite difficulty and opposition.

*What are the traits that are pleasing to God?*

In these examples and the ones we've studied in this curriculum, a list of qualities that are pleasing to God emerges. Foremost among them is devotion and obedience to God.

**Faith** – those who are called into positions of power understand that God is *entrusting* to them a part of the kingdom plan to further the blessing God desires for his people.

**Spiritual Preparation** – “Unless we build our house upon the Lord...” Directly in line with faith is spiritual preparation. We pray. We seek God. We listen. We seek wise counsel with an open mind. We pray some more. Esther, Solomon, David, Nehemiah ... all prepared themselves before they took action by humbling themselves before the Lord and seeking God's favor. They sought discernment. They understood well that their plans would fail unless God was in them.

**Humility** – power is not something to be sought, it is something to be accepted, usually only for a season. It is not an entitlement; we have no right to it. When we find ourselves in such positions of authority it does not mean we “earned” it, nor that we necessarily have the wisdom or ability to carry out the duties of our position alone. As in everything, we are part of a whole and are called at this time and in this place to offer our God-given gifts to that whole. Most often when we fail, we fail because of vanity. We think we can go it alone, that our way is the only and best way, that no one knows this situation better than we do, that we should possess what we want regardless of the consequences

(David with Bathsheba). It is arrogance and self-centeredness that propels us to be dangerous, irresponsible leaders. How do we restrain these human impulses? Only by bowing at the foot of the cross, the very symbol of the vanity and self-deceit from which Jesus died to save us.

**Courage** - Positions of authority will require us to make difficult, unpopular decisions. We will not be able to please all the people all the time. Sometimes, the tough choices will involve placing ourselves at great risk – of losing our position, our job, our reputation, our income and perceived security, our status in the community. We will be put in situations where others in power who are not scrupulous will insist or expect that we conform to their ways. If everyone in your social circle laughs at racial jokes, will you? If the teachers in your school show favor to children whose parents are influential and not to children from poor homes, will you? If you know of a leader who is sexually exploiting others, will you blow the whistle, or will you look the other way? It takes courage to do the right thing.

**An upright heart** – If we feel compelled to act, and have prepared ourselves spiritually, we should examine our motives. First, the action we think we must take usually *makes absolutely no sense* by worldly standards and is one we would never *choose* to do if not compelled by God to do so. Moses, a shepherd, walked boldly before the Pharaoh making demands? Moses led the Israelites to the edge of the river and commanded the waters to part? David, a shepherd boy, battled the giant Goliath? Esther dared to go before the king without being invited? Nathan went before David and called him out for his sin against God? No one in his right mind would do such things; they must be in God's mind. Second, *it is not about us*. God never calls us to act in his behalf only to provide for our self-centered concerns. We are not in positions of authority to increase our professional or social stature, to amass great wealth, or to pressure others into doing our will. If these are

our motives, we will soon make headlines but we will never be in line for God's blessing. In all the examples cited above, and throughout scripture, individuals are called to positions of authority as a sacred trust to care for God's people; they act on behalf of those over whom they have authority, desiring to protect, honor, and nurture them. If your action does anything to hurt the people with whom you have been entrusted, you are out of God's will and in your own will.

**Love** – they follow the Great Commandment: to love God and to love your neighbor. Out of gratitude to God for God's faithfulness and love, people who use power wisely are motivated by the love they have for those whom they lead. The priest Eli stepped aside in order to affirm and encourage young Samuel. Nehemiah wept for the remnant of his people in Judah and took a personal risk to ask permission to go and help them. Solomon asked for discernment because he realized the honor and responsibility of leading God's people. Religious leaders have a sacred trust to protect, honor and uplift those who look to them for spiritual direction, a responsibility David abused terribly in his actions toward Bathsheba.

**A season only** – There is a time and a season for all things, and this is also true of your time in a position of power. Perhaps because power itself is so enticing – the sirens' song that few humans can resist for long – it is the wise person who knows when to set aside the position of authority and enter into the whole in another way. Too often we feel, like Elijah after battling Jezebel's god Ba'al and fleeing into the desert, that we are the only one left to - do God's will, lead the project, accomplish the goals, develop the product. How God must laugh – or cry – at such arrogance. Being able to relinquish power and find other ways to serve the whole brings us back to humility.

*Time to Reflect:*

- When have you seen these traits modeled by leaders?
- Which of these traits of leadership have you worked on?
- Which are most challenging for you?

*What is my responsibility if someone in authority is abusing his or her power?*

Nothing is as difficult as confronting a leader about what is perceived to be his or her wrongdoing. This is true in a company, a school, a committee or in the church. Emotions sizzle like pats of butter dropped into a hot skillet, and it's very few of us who escape without a grease burn or two. Nevertheless, if others are being hurt, it is your responsibility to the community to act, just as Esther did.

*Preparation* — Before Esther went before the king, she prepared herself. Get all the facts, do not rely on gossip or opinion. Understand the rules of the situation and the risks involved. Prepare yourself spiritually with prayer, reflection and by seeking wise, discreet counsel. Ask others to pray with and for you. Check your own motives and be sure you are acting in the interest of the community. Go with one other person to the leader in power and, without using judgmental or accusatory language, present the situation and ask for his or her perspective on the situation. Express your concerns, suggest a solution.

*Courage and wisdom* — There are many things that make it difficult to confront a person in authority. There is fear — of personal or professional violence or of being wrong and looking foolish; there is “social nicety” – another way of saying we give those in authority the benefit of the doubt because it's just so rude and boorish to make a fuss; there is even the model of Jesus used to discourage us – we should turn the other cheek, not cast the first stone, consider the log in our own eye – but Jesus did not hesitate to confront the

sinner (the moneychangers in the temple, the Samaritan woman at the well, etc.) with his or her sin; it's what Jesus did after the confrontation that makes the difference.

*Time to Reflect:*

- When have you confronted power being abused, or seen another confronting a person in power?
- What was the outcome?
- Based on what we have explored together, could it have been handled better?

*Closing Thoughts*

As we said in the introduction of this series, power is a word that carries a lot of baggage. We have studied persons from the Bible who used power wisely and those who abused it. We know that the same person can do both, at different times in his or her life. We know that God often uses the weak and ill-prepared person to lead out in amazing ways. This lesson series only grazes the many-faceted aspects of power, but we do hope it crystallizes for you its complexity and the caution with which we should approach it. As Christians, we ultimately answer to only one power, and we can trust God to communicate with us how to balance our responses to people in positions of power – as Eli trusted that God and Samuel would communicate with one another.

Myron Madden<sup>9</sup> has given us one of the most profound statements about power in recent history. It explains in simple terminology a psychological universal truth that impacts all of us. He writes that, ideally, we receive “blessing” from our parents or primary caregivers as babies and children. We are loved deeply and well, appreciated and affirmed for who we are, and grow securely in the knowledge that we are the delight of our parents.

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<sup>9</sup> Madden, Myron C. 1988. *Blessing: Giving the Gift of Power*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

From that “blessing” we get our “identity.” In other words, we are secure in our self-worth, in our place and purpose in the world, in the contributions and gifts we can bring to the mix. We move forward into relationships, professions, and civic roles with confidence and assurance, not having to prove anything to anyone – most especially not to ourselves. From that position of knowing and trusting our “identity” then, “power” flows. It is not forced or mandated, it flows naturally and in proper perspective. We are not acting out of self-interest, and we are respected and admired because of our upright intention toward others.

To summarize, we receive “Blessing,” which gives us our “Identity,” which generates “Power.”

Most often, Madden asserts, what happens in individuals lives is just the opposite. We seek “Power,” thinking that will give us our “Identity” that will lead finally to our receiving the “Blessing.” In that backward trajectory, many a miserable person has been in positions of authority that do more harm than good.

### *Our Good News*

Here is the Good News for us. We HAVE the blessing! From before time began, God has sought to bless his people. God has relentlessly pursued us to show us his great love for us. God *already* delights in us. If we can accept God’s blessing, then we know our true identity – the sons and daughters of the Creator of the Universe. We don’t have to prove our worth by what we do or what we have or who we have authority over. We know who we are – we are the beloved. Because we can trust God in his love for us, whatever we do bubbles forth from us naturally, as refreshing waters from an underground stream. Our “power” is God’s power, and it is always and only motivated by God’s great love for all people.

