



"What Did Jesus Say About Power"

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Genesis 3

October 21, 2018

9:15 AM Service

The first recorded temptation in the scriptures, when the serpent lied to Adam and Eve to sin against God, was the temptation of power. Before humans were tempted to lie, cheat, or steal and before we could be tempted by material gain, or extravagant living, we were tempted to gain power.

Genesis 3

³ Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

*⁴ "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, **and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.**"*

When I was in grade school, lunch was a pretty big deal. You either brought your lunch and bartered for upgrades with other kids, or you bought a hot lunch, which included an entree like Chicken ala King and a side of green beans and applesauce and, always, a ½ a pint of chocolate milk. Then you found a set in the cafeteria and chaos ensued.

At my school, there was a special position of power in the cafeteria. One person was chosen to sell extra milk like a vendor at a sporting event. You'd strap on a tray filled with ½ pints of milk and went from table to table selling to any kid who happened to bring an extra 15 cents. Every kid wanted to be the milk vendor. It was a special privilege to be one and our thirst for chocolate milk could only be outdone by our thirst for power over the milk. And so, we'd ask our teacher and we'd ask the principal and the lunch ladies and anyone who would listen..." Can I sell the milk today."

I don't recall how the kid was chosen each day, but I do remember the one or two times I was allowed to be the milk vendor. It was glorious! It was a place of honor and power. It wasn't as if you GOT any of the milk, or any percentage of the sales, but it just felt special - like you were somehow in control. You had risen to the top.

It's a silly example, but it's how life goes. We are often seeking to advance to a new place of power and recognition, riding whatever wave we think will take us there. It's not a bad thing, but it's a thing. Whether it be a promotion at work, taking the lead on a new project, pushing for top marks at school, competing in sports, or whatever. Our ambition pushes us to new roles, new honors, new perks, new power. So, what are we to do with that? What should Christians be concerned with when it comes to power and influence?

We're looking at power this morning, not because I have an agenda against those who are in power or those that have influence over me or us, but because we're following a series of passages in the book of Mark and it's led us here - a scene where Jesus teaches about power and influence.

To set this up, you should know that Jesus and his young disciples are traveling to Jerusalem, and just prior to our text, Jesus has told them all that he will be condemned, spit on, flogged, and killed.

John 10: 35-45

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

³⁹ "We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There are two plain as day things that Jesus teaches here - and the disciples just don't get it. The path to glory is marked by suffering.

James and John *at least* believe in Jesus - that he is enroute to glory. And it's true, he is. They see Jesus' trajectory toward untold fame and power and they figure they could be in line to be greatly honored. So, they ask this bold question - can we be your right-and left-hand men? In the Gospel of Matthew, it says that it was actually their mother who asked this question of Jesus. One commentary I looked at said that the disciples asking this of Jesus is so embarrassing to admit that Matthew wrote in that part about their mother to save face for the disciples. I personally believe that the disciples are quite young and having mom talk to teacher is just a biblical example of helicopter parenting.

So, in response to their question, Jesus asks them a question in return using two expressions we might not understand without some exploring. He asks, can you drink this cup, and can you be baptized like me?

The cup was a phrase that could be good or bad, but had to do with how a king or person of power or rule would literally pass his cup down to his guests at a dinner or banquet. It later became an expression of how one was experiencing blessings or curses. Sometimes we'll still say "my cup, runneth over," or "my cup is now dry" though probably not in everyday conversations.

The baptism bit doesn't have much to do with ceremony, but that the word baptized means to be dipped, submerged, or overwhelmed. So, Jesus isn't talking about his baptism - as in his literal baptism by John the Baptist, but he means how he is to be immersed. Immersed in what - I'm not sure exactly what he means. He could mean immersed in God's mission, or immersed in the Kingdom of Heaven he's always going on about, or even immersed or submerged in suffering.

So, when the brothers ask if they can be honored by Jesus when he's glorified, he turns it around on them and says, well can you endure what I have to endure, and they say "yes" and then Jesus is like.... actually, you WILL, you just don't know what I'm talking about. So, they are accidentally right because indeed they will, but mostly wrong because they don't know what they're signing up for.

James and John think that Jesus is literally traveling to Jerusalem to be crowned king or something to that effect. That's why they are so anxious to get these honors. It's also why the other disciples are "indignant" when they find out what's going on. It's likely they're upset that they didn't think of it first.

This is kind of like calling "shotgun" before the proper time.

And though Jesus is headed to glory, he's headed to Jerusalem to be tried and crucified. WE know that, but they didn't.

Later in the scriptures, we get a glimpse of Jesus' cup and baptism. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before Jesus is betrayed and captured, it says this in Matthew 26:38-39

³⁸"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. [the baptism] Stay here and keep watch with me."

³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup [suffering] be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

So, the disciples are accidentally correct - they will (eventually) share in the cup and baptism of Jesus - it just wasn't what they had in mind when their mother asked if they could have places of honor when Jesus came into his glory.

And speaking of that power, a second plain-as-day teaching is this: The Kingdom of God is a power paradox.

It seems as if in this instance, Jesus' response to James and John adds to confusion. He tells them, "yes, you will drink the cup and be baptized" which he means suffering but they don't know he means that so they think..." JACKPOT! It's finally happening and we called shotgun!" This is so disruptive to the whole group that Jesus stops everyone to gather them together and straighten everything out.

He essentially tells them that their idea of greatness is incompatible with the Kingdom of God.

Who is the greatest guitar player of all time (Jimmy Hendrix)? Who is the best songwriter (Bob Dylan)? Who is the greatest chef (Gordon Ramsey)? Who is the best...whatever?

The answer is probably unknown. Best guitar player of all time? Probably some guy who never played a live gig in his life but was a genius in his garage band. Best writer? Someone out there with a blog only ever read by her mother and handful of friends. Best chef? Someone long gone who only expertly crafted food to feed their family.

Who is the greatest follower of Jesus? It's not the most well-spoken, the most talented musician, the most generous giver, the preacher with the biggest congregation, the pastor with the most Facebook likes - not necessarily. The greatest among us is the greatest servant.

My hunch is that the greatest among us is probably an unknown. Someone who serves with humility and is never given a seat at the head of the table, or a place of honor, or a badge, or trophy, but quietly, humbly puts others ahead of self. THAT's the Kingdom of Heaven kind of greatness.

And as a side note: Jesus isn't exempt from this power paradox. Jesus is exalted because he never sought to be exalted. (Philippians 2)

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature [a] God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature [b] of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

So, that's what Jesus has to say about power and greatness. You want to be great in the Kingdom of God - be a servant. You want to have Jesus' kind of glory, don't be surprised by suffering or persecution.

Let's turn the lens back at ourselves for a moment. What about our own temptation with greatness or power.

I don't know what your issue with power is, but I can tell you mine. My issue, the reason I want to have influence, is so that I can have things my own way. It's a sort of selfish ambition. It's not influence for the sake of influence, it's influences for the sake of me! And maybe you are the same or can relate.

If you feel you've never experienced that, just consider what it's like to order pizza in a group of people. Getting dinner is suddenly a game of strategically exercising power or rallying around those with influence without simultaneously upsetting everyone. Even the most deferential person will claw their way for more influence to prevent some yahoo from getting pineapple surreptitiously put on an otherwise respectable pizza.

Okay that's just a joke, and I don't really care about the small ways you get things done to make yourself comfortable. I'm more concerned with something I call my circle of influence.

The Circle of Influence is like a bank account where instead of storing my money, it stores my power potential over other people. Imagine a large circle drawn around yourself and inside that circle is everyone that you have a relationship with and therefore have some power of influence over. This has nothing to do with rank or position, but simply the potential to influence. The circle includes relationships, but also includes actions that can influence - how you respond to crisis, how you vote, how you treat strangers, your work ethic, what you spend your money on, etc. Some people have large circles, some small, but we all have one. Visualizing and understanding your circle of influence helps you in two ways.

1. It helps you mind your own beeswax.
2. It helps you be mindful of your responsibility to other people.

Can you recall a time that something you said had an immediate and profound impact on the person you said it to?

Michael Jordan, whom most of you probably have heard of, was a notorious trash talker on and off the court. There's a certain legendary story concerning an encounter between Jordan and the Charlotte Hornets' Muggsy Bogues.

"Down by one to the Chicago Bulls, the Charlotte Hornets needed to make one more huge basket to avoid getting bounced in the 1995 NBA Playoffs. Muggsy Bogues took the ball in this important possession with Michael Jordan guarding him. Eventually, Jordan stepped back and gave Bogues the space to shoot the rock. "Shoot it you [*expletive*] midget," MJ barked. The 5-foot-3 guard obliged and didn't come close. The Bulls won the game, 85-84, and moved onto the semifinals to play the Orlando Magic.

According to Johnny Bach, who was a coach on that 1995 Hornets team, Bogues told him that moment ruined his career. He was never the same, averaging just

5.9 points per game for the remainder of his career after three straight years of putting up double-digit points.”

You and I need to take seriously the potential we have to influence other people. I suspect that this is the sort of thing that keeps parents up at night. But it’s not just for moms and dads.

When my nephew Xander was little he got his very first Nintendo, a Nintendo Wii. He was showing me this game and like all little kids, he’s kind of terrible at it, and the game happened to be a remake of the old Atari game, *Tanks* which also happens to be a game I sort of cut my teeth on when I was a kid. In the original game, you were a tank, the other player was a tank, and you’d just drive around and shoot at each other until one got hit and game over. In this new version, you were a team, however, you could still shoot one another - you know, friendly fire. So, after a few easy rounds of dispatching the enemy tank, partly out of boredom and partly curiosity, I turned my sights on my nephew just to see if I could, in fact, shoot him as well (I didn’t know). Sure enough, I could and I blew his tank sky high. I can still remember the look on his face when he looked at me and exclaimed, “Uncle Tyler! You shot me!” And then in a tiny, innocent voice, he said, “but you didn’t do that on purpose did you.”

So, I grabbed him in a hug and said, “of course not!” I felt about as big as fly in that moment. Yes, the day will come when he’ll realize that the world and the people in it, even the ones he loves and trusts, will be out to get him, I didn’t want to be the one to teach him that lesson. Christians especially ought to be careful about our potential to influence others. I want to make it clear that this isn’t about becoming great in the eyes of God in his Kingdom. This isn’t 4 steps to be sure you’ll have a place of honor. This is looking at the simple fact that the Kingdom according to Jesus is made up of servants and slaves and not big shots and power grabbers.

Here’s the main point:

Power and influence are important in God’s kingdom but only so far as they are used to serve. The church and by extension the Bible have this cartoonish reputation of preaching that money, sex, power - these are all bad and should be avoided at all costs. It’s simply not true. The bible does warn about the love of money, and dangers of unchecked sexuality and the abuse of power, but none of those is bad all on its own.

Whatever little corner of this world you claim as your own, whatever your domain, whoever you call your own, whatever has been entrusted to you - these things we must serve, not rule over them, but serve.

You may not be a person of power, but you have a Circle The people inside that circle - where you have potential to influence - you have an obligation to help, serve, encourage, admonish, and support. It’s not just a good idea, it’s our duty as Christ followers. In God’s Kingdom, the humbled is lifted up, the servant is praised, the helper is honored, the less is more, and the least is the greatest.