

Power

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[0 : 00] The topic that we're dealing with today is power, and it comes under, again, the general theme of temptations in the city.

And I'm not sure that power is a temptation. I suspect it's a necessity, and we all have to have a little bit of it, or else we're going to be in trouble in existing.

You know that there's something about power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but absolutely no power is pretty grim, too. And that's what a lot of people in the city suffer from.

But it happens in my business. I'm in the church, you see, and you have to, like, in our church, if you leave the center of Granville Street, on which our church is located, you have to go up one step to get onto the sidewalk, even.

You have to go up two more steps to get into the church, and you can get a pew at that level. If you go up two more steps, you can join the choir. If you go up one more step, you can be an acolyte or a server.

[1 : 28] And if you go up one more step, you're in charge. You got the power. And that's the place you take.

In a magazine called Equity Magazine, which is published, I guess, here in Vancouver, that talks about power desks and talks about Murray Pezzum's \$20,000 desk, which must be very impressive.

He talks about another fellow who has entertained some of the senior people in this country at his desk. And you sort of have the boss's office is full of the symbols of power.

You know, the little row of buttons that he can press, the intercommunication system that he can operate with his foot, his 150-foot yacht that is in full color on the wall.

And all these kinds of things give him a position of tremendous power from which he does the thing, which is his work. If you go into court, you find that the judge sits here between two light bulbs, according to tradition.

[2 : 44] And he is the whole, you know, this is the me session of the court. You get that sort of chant that comes before he comes in.

And the whole courtroom stands with heads bowed. And he walks in and takes his place before anybody can be seated. And then some individual down about here is asked in a loud voice, are you, do you, what is it they say to him, are you, do you plead guilty or not guilty?

You know, and of course, by this time he feels guilty anyway, because he, he's, doesn't matter very much. He's, he's been reduced down to, what does it matter?

But anyway, that's, that's the way we do it. That's the way our justice system works. Hospitals are even better at it than courtrooms. I don't know if you've ever been to hospital, but I have walked three miles to go and register as a patient in a hospital.

And, you know, you're there, you're on time, you're ready to do whatever they want you to do. And they say to you, sit down. So you sit down and you wait, you know.

[3 : 59] There's not anything obvious that you're waiting for, but it's, it's part of the process. And so you sit and wait.

And then some sweet young lady comes up to you and asks you when you had your last bowel movement. And by this time you're beginning to quiver slightly.

How old are you? And you've been assigned to room 237. In a few minutes there will be an orderly along with a wheelchair to take you there.

You know, so having walked three miles to get there, you now go the last hundred yards in a wheelchair so that you don't end up suing the hospital for falling. And then, you know, the pajamas they put on you.

I mean, And, I mean, what's happened is that they have taken over completely. And you are a helpless, quivering mass of flesh there in a bed.

[5 : 04] And better not to have any mind of your own until they discharge you. So that's, we have ways of setting up power in the city, you know.

And all of you have the particular way that you do it in your business. If you go to one of these big food stores, they're increasingly looking like a stockyard where, you know, you're put down this row and this row and this row and then you line up here.

And once they get 150 customers in the store, then they take off all but one of the cashiers. And this is the way they demonstrate that they are in control.

They have the power. And you are reduced to, you know, quivering insensibility. That's what happens to us in our society.

And it happens all the time. And we do it to each other. It's simply so that we can assume this, that this is me here and this is you here.

[6 : 17] And it doesn't matter whether it's the principal and the student or whether it's the doctor and the patient or whether it's the banker and the person who wants to borrow a dollar and a half.

And you've got to set up this structure. This is the power structure within which we work. And, you know, I mean, one of the greatest, as my experience, one of the greatest tyrannies in the whole of the city is generally exerted by parking lot attendants, you know, who can reduce you to a quivering mass of rage.

And there's nothing you can do because I'm just doing what I was told. And I am. And you better do what you're told. And that's the way it all happens.

Well, this is basically the way our society works. I mean, to get the, to get this position and to try and make it work.

That you are in control. That you have the authority. And you know that the problems that are created, because very often this person who has the authority has none of the qualifications to have that kind of authority.

[7 : 36] I mean, we think of it in terms of, of our politicians, you know, that they hold positions of great authority, but whether they have the qualifications to do that or not is a question.

But it's important in our society that they should have that authority, whether they have the qualifications or not. And we try and keep some track of that. But it's, it's difficult.

But always it's trying to set up that kind of relationship. Because power, power means enabling. Power means capacity.

Power means that, that you can, that you can do something. Now, where do the, where are the sources of power? And, and you know that, that money is generally considered power.

If you can create fear, that's power. There's considered to be demonic power or evil power. There's all sorts of kinds of power in which the person, this person tries to exert influence over this person.

[8 : 36] And that's, that's the kind of thing that happens persistently and consistently in our society. And in addition to trying to set this structure up, the, the, the, what we're, what we're also trying to do is to avoid the place of powerlessness.

You know, the, and, and the place of powerlessness. Like when you walk into a hospital where you've heard that somebody whom you know and respect is dreadfully ill.

And you're just struck with a sense of terrible powerlessness. What am I going to say? How am I going to treat this person? What am I going to do? Am I going to make jokes like we usually do? How do I carry this off? We feel really powerless and avoid those kinds of situations. If somebody has died, do we want to see the relatives? No, we avoid them.

And so we consistently try and establish places of power and consistently avoid places of powerlessness so that we don't ever have to confront people who, who, who make us aware of our powerlessness.

[9 : 53] And the, we really do hate to be in that position. You know, when, when a fellow comes along to you and says, I can't draw unemployment insurance.

I haven't got an address to get welfare. I haven't eaten for a week. And he is, he is in a sense, totally powerless. But what he's really telling you is that I regard you as the answer to my problem so you demonstrate your power in the face of my powerlessness.

And he kind of reverses the role on you because he's got all the power because he's got all the need. And you're there, supposed to be somebody who helps people in need. And, and, and you,

you can't do anything, you know.

And I remember one fellow who came to see me and he was very fed up with the fact that I couldn't help him the way he wanted to be helped. And he says, and I've, and I've been an Anglican all my life.

He says, I think I'll go and see what the Catholics can do, you know. Well, you know, he reduces you. I mean, he sort of underlines your powerlessness.

[11:02] Well, this is, this is why in, in the way we set up, the temptation is to set up a structure in which we never face the reality of our own powerlessness.

And when disease hits or some tragedy hits or circumstance overtakes you, that the whole power structure on which you are dependent is removed from you, then you're, you feel caught.

Well, I want to suggest to you that the answer to this is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now, I really am sensitive about this. Last week when I talked to you about sex was the topic. One of my good friends said, I came here to hear about sex and you just talked about religion, you know. So I, I, I am. The, the, and I, and I'm very aware that I have in myself a commitment to talk about the person of Jesus Christ.

[12:14] Now, I know the reason I need to apologize to you for that is because we live in a, in a multicultural society in which that comes close to heresy.

You know, that that, in a sense, violates the integrity of our society to talk about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. To fit him into a multicultural pattern where he is one of many is fine, but to talk about him as being unique in any way is not very acceptable.

We are people who have been emancipated from religious superstition. And to talk about religious values is accepted, but to talk about a person is unacceptable.

We are people who are intellectually competent and understand a whole lot that all our forebears never understood so that Christianity in terms of a personal faith in Jesus Christ is largely unacceptable to us intellectually.

And so I apologize to talking to people like that. And you can't talk about Jesus Christ because of respect for other people's religion. And you don't want to be disrespectful of their religion or their convictions or anything else.

[13:33] But does that mean that you can't do it? So that how do you handle that kind of situation?

Well, in our very pluralistic society, how do you talk about the person of Jesus Christ?

Well, I don't know whether I can do any more than tell you that I'm aware that it's a problem for you and it's a problem I would, I consider it my responsibility to continue to confront you with and to suggest to you that as far as I can see, there is no other answer comparable to the answer that God has made to us in Jesus Christ.

Now, I don't care, I mean, I don't care how you might choose to dismiss that reality. It's a reality which I think we have to come to face with, face to face with.

So what you have then is you have the person of Christ going and confronting over and over again situations in which he demonstrated power where we would be powerless.

[14:49] A widow comes out of the village of Nain and her son is being carried on a stretcher, a bier, and he's being carried out.

And this procession of life, which is Jesus and his disciples, meets the procession of death, which is the widow and her dead son. And they come up against each other.

Who stands out of the way, you know? Who steps aside? Does Jesus step aside and allow death to process through? Or does death step aside and allow Jesus?

Well, you know that in that situation, Jesus touched the bier and the man was raised to life again. Jesus is confronted by 5,000 people who haven't anything to eat.

And you know the helplessness and powerlessness that the disciples felt on that situation. And yet Jesus had the power in that situation to cope.

[15:51] And when a father in agony said, my daughter is at the point of death, please come. Well, you know, most of us would turn from our friends or anybody at that point and please go.

You know, you deal with it because I am powerless to help you. And I don't want my powerlessness exaggerated by coming with you. And when Jesus is confronted by a blind man where we could do nothing, he has the power to cope with the situation.

So that Jesus is constantly in the position which we would consider, which we avoid because of the fear of our powerlessness. And Jesus steps into that situation and power emerges out of that

situation.

So much so that when one woman came and touched the hem of his garment, Jesus said, I perceive that power has gone out from me to bring healing to her.

So that in some way, Jesus was the focus of the demonstration of the power of God, not by some authoritarian structure that he had built around himself, but as one who had no place to hang his hat, no place to sleep, to lay down his head.

[17 : 15] He had nothing. You know, he was despised and rejected by his society. All the authority structures and power structures dismissed him.

And yet they recognized that he was the great threat to the power structure which they had built. So that they saw the necessity of preserving their power structure by getting rid of this person who had power without structure, whose power was in himself and in his relationship to God, and who was empowering people, not with a structure in which they lived, but in terms of the vitality of their relationship to God.

And so that those people, then and since, have consistently gone in his name to places where a powerlessness in order that God might reveal his power through them.

It's not their power. It's the power of God revealed through them. So that, you know, the classic example for our age is Mother Teresa going to the stinking dying of the slums of Calcutta and choosing to nurse people who were on the point of death.

Now all the power structures of our world turn away from the problem and look the other way because we are so aware of our powerlessness.

[18 : 56] We recognize that our power works within what sometimes are the narrow parameters of our power structure, but beyond that, we are powerless.

So that a man may come down and sit at his oak desk within the marble halls which contain the office where his business is carried on. And then he walks home to a wife and children where he has forfeited any power or authority he has and he's reduced to nothing because he has no power in that situation.

And she says, why do you spend so much time at the office? Well, it's very obvious. Why? Because we avoid the areas of powerlessness in our own lives.

So that what I think comes out of this, and the thing that I want to illustrate to you is this, that I think Jesus came into the world in this role up against the power structures which we have.

And I think that we consider him to be the despised and rejected one because he doesn't apparently have the kind of social prestige, the intellectual capacity, all the things that we have and we build into the power structures in which we...

[20 : 26] What do moths and butterflies do? You know what they do. The cocoon of power that we create around ourselves to hide our own powerlessness.

And he comes and challenges that. And I think he comes to us in that way. And what in fact happens, the kind of miracle that takes place, and one that is, you know, one that is demonstrated, that is that, you see, if you stand over here and look down at Jesus on his cross, then you are looking from your position of power and seeing him as contemptible and someone you have to get rid of because, in a sense, he undermines the perfect balance of power that you have already achieved for yourself.

And the only way that you can approach Christ is from down here where you are the little person and you see him as the big person. And that's the wonderful line which comes in the Magnificat of Mary where she says, My soul doth magnify the Lord, they make him great, and he who is mighty hath magnified me.

I become great because of him. Now, the way this works in the passage that we're looking at, and I want to take these just two or three minutes to look at it, where, if you have it right there in front of you, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the mighty, from the wise and the understanding, and revealed them to babe.

Now, Abba, Father, is taking that relationship to God where you are the child and he is the Father. Not where you are the wise and learned and powerful person in the world, and there is this impotent person, Jesus Christ, but it reverses.

[22 : 34] And you discover in your life the areas of your own powerlessness as you are confronting and are confronted by Jesus Christ.

He is Father. He is Lord of heaven and earth. And he has hidden these things from the powerful, the wise, and the understanding and revealed them to babe.

And that's why he says, except you become as a little child in relationship to me, you won't even know what the kingdom is all about. Because you are so obsessed with the power structure that gives meaning to your life on a temporary basis, probably.

You're so obsessed with that that you don't understand that the real power is with God and he can speak to you if you find yourself in the place of powerlessness.

And sometimes he has to bring us to the place of powerlessness before we begin to understand what it is that Jesus is talking about. So he said, He said, all things have been delivered to me by my Father.

[23 : 49] No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son. In other words, the qualifications for knowing God in his power, in his omnipotence, is that you are, it is revealed to you by Jesus Christ.

And he says, well, how do you find that out? And Jesus then gives that most gracious invitation with which this chapter ends, come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me that this is the relationship in which we are meant to live our lives. A relationship in which we recognize our weakness and our powerlessness and that God has revealed himself as Father through the person of Jesus Christ, his Son, and that we learn about him from that.

So that what we look for is the place of powerlessness in our own life. So that if you want to see the activity of God in your life, find a place of powerlessness.

See, find a place where you're not coping, where you can't cope, where you're afraid. I mean, this happens to me in my, I mean, I, I don't, I guess I'm not a very good example, but so often when I have to go and visit somebody who's seriously ill in the hospital and that illness is compounded by the fact that I should have been to see them when they were well and I never had and that therefore I had failed in my duty as their minister and now I'm going in to see them and to try and make up amends for that and I, I just made very small indeed in my own understanding and I feel completely powerless in that situation.

[25 : 37] But it is that situation I am convinced that we all have to find ourselves in where we have failed, we haven't done what we ought to have done, we're not capable of the things that are demanded of us, we can't meet the situation that confronts us and therefore we need a power which doesn't come from ourselves and what God has said to us in Christ is that that power is available and that power is available not by you creating some huge power structure out of which you're prepared to work but that power is available to you when you come to the place of acknowledging your own powerlessness and if you've lost touch with that reality in your life you have lost touch with what life's all about.

Let me say a prayer. Father, we think of the power structures of our city and our place in them but we ask that you and your grace will help us to come to the place where we are confronted flat up against the reality of our own powerlessness and that in that place you will meet us and that we may be those who come to you seeking rest and refreshment seeking to know what it is to be enabled to be empowered to cope with the situation when none of that power comes from us but only from you.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.