

Jesus is better than power

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[0 : 00] Well, this is our final in the series on Jesus is Better Than, and we're going to be talking about power tonight. And I'm going to begin tonight by describing three types of power-seeking people.

They're actually on your outline in front of you. And the first is the tyrant. This is the type of person who seeks power for his or her own benefit.

Everyone else exists to serve them and their needs in life. Now, some of you may have noticed that the reruns of Star Wars is on again, Channel 7.

In fact, it's Attack of the Clones tonight. Actually, I just realized I forgot to put the tape on, the recording on, so I might have to skip dinner to get home. Anyway, but just watching these movies and reruns prompted me to think of this guy.

Your typical emperor or the emperor, the typical tyrant, who not only has all the powers of the dark side, but is a master manipulator as well.

[1 : 08] These are our tyrants in movies, aren't they? But there's also a fair share of tyrants that we get in real life as well. So on the world stage, we've seen, for example, the rise of dictators like Kim Jong-un or Robert Mugabe, who amazingly this week was appointed, what was it?

Goodwill ambassador for the WHO. Anyway, but these are people who wield absolute power over their countries. But then there are also what I call the low-level dictators in our everyday lives, like the unreasonable boss, who's the control freak, looking over your shoulders all the time, controlling the length of your lunch breaks and maybe even your toilet breaks, monitoring your internet use to the minute, the boss who makes your lives miserable so that theirs can be easy.

And no one likes tyrants, do they? Because what they do is rob us of our powers or our freedom. They deprive us of our power and make our lives hell.

So that's the first type of power-seeking person, the tyrant. But let's move on to the second type of power-seeking person, what I call the messiah, or more precisely, those who think they are messiahs.

Now here I'm referring to people who seek power because they want to save or change the world. Now maybe not the entire world, but maybe just one aspect of it.

[2 : 48] So it may be poverty or racial sort of inequality. But what they desire is power to rid the world of one aspect of injustice. And many people, for instance, would enter politics precisely for this reason.

And in fact, I think the Greens are actually a party that exists solely with that aim, to right the wrongs in the world. All of them seem to be what we call SJWs or social justice warriors.

And their power or their desire for power is to change the world. And so we have messiahs who seek power for good, actually, not evil, unlike the tyrants.

They have noble motivations to make the world a better place. And perhaps that's maybe how you are as well. You've maybe sought power by being a leader, say at work or school, because you want to make the world a better place.

Well, you might even think that's why I became a pastor, that I am a pastor so that I can use my authority to change lives for the better.

[3 : 59] So the motivations of a messiah may be noble, is actually noble. But again, this sort of power or power-seeking isn't without its dangers.

Because we need only look at history to see how easily messiahs turn to tyrants. How they start with good intentions, only to turn to the dark side in practice.

So take Stalin, for example. He actually started with a desire to make Russia a more egalitarian or equal society. And yet, by the end of his rule, he was responsible for millions of deaths in the Russian gulags, amongst other places, and for the harsh treatment of even more.

Likewise, many of you would know, your parents may have lived through it, Chairman Mao had the same goals for China. And initially, he actually won many Chinese over, particularly when they saw his dedication on that long march, and then compared it with the seemingly corrupt nationalist government of the time.

But then again, once in power, Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution. Dissenters were tortured and put into labor camps for re-education.

[5 : 18] Now, of course, it's not just communism, because even back in the French Revolution, that whole episode was tainted by a period we've come to call the Reign of Terror.

And during that period, many were killed and tortured, all in the name of equality, liberty, and fraternity. In fact, Robespierre was one of the leaders of that time.

He had this to say, and I've got it on the screen. He said that terror is nothing more than speedy, severe, and inflexible justice. And then adding, without which virtue is powerless.

You see how ironic that statement is? That to bring in a virtuous vision of society, he had to resort to terror, the abuse of power, in order to make that happen.

And he couldn't even see the hypocrisy of it, could he? That he was undermining the very thing, the very virtue, which he was seeking to cultivate in the first place. But that's what power does, isn't it?

[6 : 27] It blinds us to our abuse of it. Some of you will probably be familiar with that saying, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Even absolute power in the hands of do-good messiahs corrupts. Right, let's turn now to the third type of power-seeking person.

Because stuck somewhere between the tyrant and the messiah is what I call the mini-me power-seeker. It's just little you and me seeking power just so that we can run our lives and do what we want with it.

So, us mini-me's have no interest in imposing our will on others. Nor are we interested in absolute power. But all we want is enough power to take charge of our lives.

We want to be in charge of that tiny piece of territory called my life. So that we can chart our own destiny and pursue our own dreams in life.

[7 : 32] And surely that's not too much to ask, is it? Surely that's a legitimate reason for power. Well, yes. Except that even here, it's not without its problems, is it?

First of all, while we may just want to control our lives, so does everyone else in the world. And sooner or later, the power I want over my life runs up against your desire to run your own life.

So just take one very simple example, that of getting to work or school each day. Now, I'm sure all of you want to do, all you want to do each day is to be able to get from your bed to your desk without being held up in the quickest possible time.

Because face it, sleep is precious and you don't want to get out of bed one minute before time. But of course, the problem is that that's everyone's goal as well, isn't it?

They want the power to do that just like you. And that includes your sister who happens to share the bathroom with you each morning. And unbelievably, she wants to use it at the same time as you.

[8 : 49] Or the driver in front of you on the road who insists on turning right on a major road, causing the traffic to bank up all the way behind him and slowing everyone else down.

Why must he do that at this time when I'm just about driving through trying to get to the station? Or what about that guy at your morning coffee stop, the last before you get to the office, who just can't decide what he wants to order and then keeps wanting to chat up the barista as well.

Now all these people want the same power as you, don't they? They want to just have the freedom to do what they want to do with their lives. Except their power restricts your freedoms, doesn't it?

Now this is a somewhat trivial example, but you can think of more important ones, can't you? That really do curtail your power when the exercise of someone else's freedom actually restricts severely what you want to do with your life.

But if you think about it, actually other people's freedoms are not the only problem because there are so many other things in life over which you have no power, no control, and which actually have the ability to severely impact us like disease or sickness, like what happens to our shares or investments which then impact on the way we're able to live or the risk of being caught up in a natural disaster or even other disasters like acts of terrorism.

[10 : 29] And so really there's no guarantee that mini-me power seeker is able to get what he or she wants in life. All right, so we have there three reasons for power seeking.

There may be more, but I'm just going to leave those there tonight because what I want to do now is turn to Jesus. Because in Jesus, what we find is someone who actually had all the power in the world and yet amazingly chose to give it away.

You see, I haven't put Jesus down as the fourth type of power seeking person because the reality is Jesus actually doesn't need to seek power. He has all the power that he needs just by being who he is, the Son of God.

That's why we had in our reading tonight from Colossians chapter 15, chapter 1 verse 15, and this is what it says, that the Son, Jesus, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

For in him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him.

[11 : 38] He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Now that's a lot of power right there, isn't it? To be able to create all things in heaven and on earth.

To be able to hold all things together. Friends, the Bible says that we exist only because of Jesus, and that we continue to live and exist only because of him.

Elsewhere in the Bible, we discover that all authority on earth has been given to him by his Father. So not only does Jesus not need any more power, there's actually no power that he doesn't already have.

He's the powerful Son of God. Who, when we read the Gospels, can make things happen just by speaking. Who can heal people, even when he himself wasn't there.

Or he can see into people's hearts and minds. Or calm the storms and the waves on the sea. And yet, what does he do with this power?

[12 : 46] He only ever uses it for the benefit of others. If you read through the Gospels, not one single miracle has been done or performed to suit himself.

Instead, he would often go without. As he says in this verse, foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

He could have performed his miracle and Hotel Sheraton is there. But he did not do that. And if we look at his last days, you see that when he was arrested, he rebuked Peter for trying to retaliate on his behalf.

At his trial, Jesus chose not to save himself even when he could have called down his angel army. You see, every other so-called Messiah seeks power in order to save the world.

But Jesus is the only one who saves the world by giving up his power. And that's why I've called him in the outline the powerless savior of the world in inverted commas.

[13 : 56] And yet, it's this very powerlessness that becomes the power by which the world is saved. Long before Jesus arrived on the earth, God actually gave us a picture of him as his servant.

That was our reading in Isaiah chapter 42, which I've again got on the slide for you. In it, God foretells that his servant will bring justice to the world. That is, he will bring God's rule to the world, but he'll do so in weakness.

He will not shout or cry out. He will not raise his voice to impose this will on the world. Rather, what Jesus did was to die on the cross, seemingly powerless.

And yet, paradoxically, by doing so, he's able to save us all. And if you come back to Colossians with me, this is confirmed explicitly there as well.

So, verse 19 and 20, which I've again got on the slide of chapter 1, it says that it's through the death of Jesus and through his blood shed on the cross that we're reconciled to God.

[15 : 02] We have peace with God by putting our faith in Jesus. And having made peace with God, verse 13 and 14, a bit earlier, we're sort of working backwards in Colossians tonight, verse 13 and 14, we're rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son in whom we have redemption.

That is, our freedom is bought and our sins are forgiven by Jesus' death. Which brings me back to us again and our relationship with power, my third point.

What is our relationship then with power both as individuals and collectively as a human race? You see, the truth is that we all seek power.

That's just almost a fact. But the real point is, if we fail to understand God's ways, then what we end up doing is seeking power for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way.

And the first thing we need to realize about God's way is this, that actually without Christ and without God, we're truly powerless, whether as individuals or as a society.

[16 : 13] some of you this week may have been following the hashtag Me Too campaign on social media. As many of you know, it all started with Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, yes, being sacked because he finally got exposed for sexually harassing, maybe even raping female actors over the last 30 years.

It's horrible stuff. But in the aftermath, Alyssa Milano, one of the actresses, she suggested in a tweet, which I've got on the slide, that other women should hashtag Me Too as well if they've experienced the same thing, just to highlight just how widespread the problem is.

And needless to say, the response was overwhelming, some of which shocked some men, but I'm sure surprised very few women. Now, all this comes, of course, on the back of other revelations that we've seen in the recent past, like the domestic violence that's been going on, particularly in some churches, or the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse, or the harassment of women in university colleges, or, you know, in the medical or legal profession.

There's a lot of this sort of stuff going on at the moment, isn't there? And I've read various op-eds and blogs about this. Some have expressed pure outrage, pointing the finger at certain culprits, people in power, others have been a bit more thoughtful, saying, you know, we all have to admit our part in this, we're all responsible.

But in almost all that I've read, save with one single US Christian blogger, the only solution that I've seen put up, whether it's us as individuals or as a society, the only thing I've seen put up as the way to fix this is that we need to try harder or do better.

[18 : 06] If only people in authority didn't look the other way or if only we would empower the victims to speak up or if only we shame men into not covering up for their mates or if only we stop perpetrating sexist culture, if only more women were at higher levels, at the highest levels of power, then we would be able to solve this problem once for all.

Now, please don't hear me wrong because some of these things need to be done and ought to be done. And yes, we shouldn't look away when evil is done or when we have a chance to redress inequality, do something about it.

That's not my point. Rather, what I'm pointing out is that nowhere is it recognized that actually at the heart of it all, these problems exist because we're powerless.

They exist because we're so deeply sinful to the core that without God, we actually have no hope of overcoming anything, much less some of the horrors that we've read. Now, it's not that as humans we have no power.

That's not what I mean by being powerless. Rather, it's the fact that without Christ, we're powerless to use the power we have in the right way. Let me say that again. We're powerless to use the power we have in the right way.

[19 : 21] In other words, we can't help but abuse the power that we're given. So, for instance, without God, many men are enslaved to their sexual desires.

And so, you couple that with power, you know, like having a powerful executive like Weinstein or even a premiership player, they will likely abuse that power to get what they want.

I do not say this to excuse their behavior but simply to point out how truly captive we are to sin. And even if, as a society, we're able to stop one aspect or one type of sexual sin, it will simply just crop up or re-express itself in other ways.

That's just how powerless we are without God. Likewise, leaders are often overbearing because it's so easy to let ambition and pride overcome us and to use our authority to serve us, ourselves, rather than others.

So, yes, making those in power accountable is important. We ought to do that but does that not just demonstrate that deep down we're actually all sinful to the core and therefore we need all these safeguards so that power does not go unchecked?

[20 : 38] And conversely, if what we lack is power, if that's you, you're thinking, oh, those power people, they're the ones, even those who lack power, although we can't abuse power, what we end up doing is we end up succumbing to jealousy, despair, revenge, or fear.

if you like, we allow our lack of power to control us and to lead us to vice rather than to virtue. But the response of the world seems to be to try harder, isn't it?

And that's understandable because once we start denying God's existence and refuse to allow Him to have a say in our lives, then what else can we do? Even though, ultimately, it doesn't work.

we're just going to keep tinkering at the edges, but yet we're going to say, no, we can keep trying harder because otherwise, we're just going to give up, aren't we? And so friends, let me urge you that if right now you're struggling with sin, trying harder is not going to work.

If trying to be empowered has got you nowhere, then let me suggest that what we really need to do in the face of such violence and injustice in this world is actually to weep and mourn at just how powerless we are.

[22 : 02] That is, repent and turn to God and tell Him we are powerless to save ourselves without Jesus. And as Paul describes it, what God then does is rescue us when we put our trust in Jesus from the dominion of darkness to bring us into the kingdom of His Son.

Paul actually says in Romans 5, verse 6, which is on the slide, that just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Christ died for us so that He might bring us into His kingdom. God has done what we were powerless to do for ourselves. And the amazing thing is that when we do that, when we finally get to that place of humility and total dependence on Jesus, God actually then gives us the very power that we lack to begin to live the life or the way He intends.

We come under the power of His Son and therefore we begin to live by the power of His Son. And so in that most wonderful and upside-down way, which is the gospel, we too become powerful in Christ.

And that's why in our reading again in Colossians 1, in verse 11, Paul can pray that Christians be strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might. That is something that only makes sense because we are now in God's kingdom.

[23 : 39] But before we get carried away, I want you to notice what that power is for. So just look on the words there. It's not to do with it what we want, is it?

It's not even to save or change the world. No, rather we are given that power so that we may have great endurance and patience. In other words, God's power is given not firstly to change our outer world but our inner world.

It's given so that we can live in joy and peace and hope even when we can't change our circumstances. And so, if you've been abused by someone with power here tonight, God's power helps you to know that you are loved by God and you are secure in Christ.

Even, even if justice cannot be served now in this life, perhaps the perpetrator has died or something, you are still secure in Christ and loved by God and you can rest in the knowledge that God knows and one day justice will be served.

Or if, as another example, you find yourself at the bottom of the power ladder, whether it's at work or at school, then knowing that we have God's power stops you having to grasp for that worldly power, to try and climb that ladder of power because God's power is already at work with you.

[25 : 05] Even though you may not have worldly power, He will enable you to serve Him and to do what He has asked of you. His power that is working in you, in other words, is greater than the power of all those people that are higher up in that ladder.

And thirdly, if you happen to be a leader and so have some power to exercise, then being under God's power will help you to use that power in the way that Jesus did.

Not for Himself, but for others. You will be able to learn how to relinquish power if needed or use it to empower others. You will learn not to abuse it or be fearful if others take advantage of you because again, you know that your security is not found in worldly power but in God.

It's a great paradox, isn't it? Like, you know, a sponge with water, the harder we grasp at power, the more we find its true potency actually slipping from our grasp.

We end up either abusing it or it ends up destroying us. But if we relinquish our lust for power and instead desire after Jesus instead, if we seek Him first, then not only do we have all the blessings that come from following Jesus, that of joy, peace, love and forgiveness, but we get also God's power working in us.

[26 : 36] And so, my friends, do you have this assurance in your life, the certainty that God's power is at work in you? That comes when you put your trust in Jesus.

And if you have not done that tonight, then let me ask you to do that. Not go chasing after power, thinking that it offers you whatever you're looking for in life, but hold on to Jesus instead.

Give your life to Him and put your trust in Him. He's the one that is better than power and more than that, having trust in Him, you have God's power working in your life for your good.

Let me pray for us. Father, our hearts are just grieving and heavy as we see not just people with power abusing it for sexual purposes, but people just abusing it generally, whether it's on the world stage with political leaders or with people in our lives at work, at school.

And try as we might, unless we trust in you, unless we know true power as seen in God, we end up ourselves being tempted to do the same.

[27 : 52] Father, forgive us help us to see how powerless we are without Jesus. But help us to also see what great power there is in Jesus who, though He was weak and yet, God, you raised Him up in power and by His death and resurrection you have given us salvation and salvation for the whole world.

for those of us who are seeking for power and life for whatever reason and still not finding it, open our eyes to the beauty and the truth of Jesus.

Help us to seek and long after Him. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.