

A Mess Worth Making
“Power Play”

Kevin Haah
Ephesians 5:21



November 9, 2014

[Slide 1] We are in the middle of a sermon series called, **A Mess Worth Making**. It is a series on relationship and the mess/the conflicts in the relationship.

[Slide 2] Today’s sermon is entitled, **Power Play**.

I remember I was with a bunch of guys, and one guy was talking about power in marriage. This was a piece of advice he was giving to a mutual friend who was about to be married: Make sure you grab power immediately, he said. “If you lose in the beginning, you will lose for the rest of your life. You got be the man. You gotta wear the pants. Don’t let her control you brother!”

In some ways, relationships are power plays. How do I get what I want? For some, in order to get what they want, they use violence, coercion, and even abuse to get it. It usually doesn’t start like that. It starts out with gentle sweet talk. When the relationship is going well, the gentle sweet talk works. As you get into the relationship, there is more push back from the other side. So, you try to persuade, negotiate. But, sometimes, that doesn’t work either. Sometimes, you try to manipulate (or here is a word that we use—train) the other person to do what you want them to do. I heard a story of a female dolphin trainer. She said that the way she trains the dolphin is to reward good behavior and ignore undesirable behavior. It works well. So, she tried it on her husband. She would reward good behavior and ignore undesirable behavior. She was essentially training her husband to do what she wanted. It’s a power play. Of course, sometimes when your attempt to control the person does not work, you feel like you have no choice but to get loud and angry; then, the other party doesn’t like that either. You end up on a downward spiral yelling at each other, making demands on each other.

Now, this gets even worse with some Christians. They start saying things like, God says you have to submit to me because I am the head of the household. I have seen a situation in which the wife submitted to the husband in everything. She really didn’t have a say in the relationship. He gave her an allowance just like one of the kids. He treated her like one of the kids because he was the decision-maker. The church taught him that. She eventually felt so stifled in the relationship that she left. The church actually officially disciplined her and put her on the public roll of people called to repent.

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The question is: is this what marriage is supposed to be like? Is it the man in power and woman in submission?

I am not just talking about marriage: I am also talking about all relationships. Is it about seeking power and controlling others or is there another way? What do the Scriptures say?

[Slide 3] Let's start with Ephesians 5:21.

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

To submit in the original language literally means to stand-under another. It means to serve, and not lord over. It's not just this one verse. The idea that followers of Jesus Christ are called to submit, humble, and serve one another is all over the teachings of Jesus. Would you agree that servants are powerless compared to masters and commanders? How many times does the New Testament call us to serve one another? It uses the variations of the word, 67 times in 58 verses, and most of them tell us to be servants or describes us as servants.

Let's me just give you some quick examples.

[Slide 4] Mark 10:42-45:

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.”

Let me give you another one. Philippians 2:5-8:

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

6 Who, being in very nature God,

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

7 rather, he made himself nothing

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by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

[Slide 6] 8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Could it be more clear? We follow a God who came and served and gave up power to love us.

And do you know how many times the NT calls us to be masters and commanders of one another? None. Really. None. It never tells us to rule over others or master over others. It always tells us to serve others. I know some of you are thinking: doesn't there a Bible verse that says the husband is the head of the wife? We'll get there later. You will see that it is misunderstood. And that always means we don't seek power-over other people. We submit to other people.

Now, I know a lot of us don't have a problem with the idea of submitting to God. The Bible obviously tells us to submit to God. What is interesting is that many other religions do that as well. The word for Muslim means one who submits to God's laws. But, in Christianity, we are called not only to submit to God, but also to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ! We are called to serve one another. Why? Because our Lord was a servant. He came to serve. He went down and lost power.

It's interesting how we don't get this teaching even though it is at the center of our faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that he came down and served us, and as such, he is calling us to serve one another. That's not just an optional extra for good Christians; that's the heart of our faith.

Our faith is not about control and ruling over others. Our faith is about serving others and submitting to others.

I want to show you how this works in various different contexts. As I show you how it works, I want to show you that it actually works. If we took on the attitude of

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Jesus and became a servant, our relationships will dramatically improve. We will actually live a happier life.

This completely goes against the way of the world. The world says, become the top dog. Become the alpha. Do what it takes to get there. Dominate. Seek power. And how do you think that has been going for the world? Is it really working?

I want to show you that the way of Jesus actually works in all of our relationships, not only the Christian ones, but also in our work, and other places.

Let me try to answer some questions you might have regarding this as a way of explaining how this works.

1. [Slide 7] Does this mean I have to do everything the other person wants me to do?

No. We are called to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ. So, if the other person is telling us to do things that do not show reverence to Christ, we must pause. We must examine the situation. So, if someone is telling you to violate the law, hurt someone, hurt yourself, demean another human being, you say no. We serve our Lord first. But, for the most part, serving others has to do with doing for them things we want other people to do for us. Yes, it does mean that you go and do the dishes even if you don't feel like it. It means you get the water when the other person looks thirsty. It means to wait on that person.

It's doesn't mean you are called to be a doormat, however. You are called to serve their needs, what they really need, not necessarily their wants. Isn't it interesting that God does not always meet our wants? He always meets our needs. There is a difference between serving to meet the other person's wants and needs. Now, sometimes, what the other person wants is good, and we are called to meet it. But, if what they want is not what they need, what is good for them in the long run, we are not called to serve them what they want. That would not be love. If they want more illegal drugs, you know it's destroying them, to truly serve them would be to not give them what they want and seek to help them seek recovery.

A Mess Worth Making
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November 9, 2014

So, to answer the question, we don't give everyone what they want.

Most of the times, it's not that clear. But, that's where it takes some discernment. The goal is serve them for their benefit. So, if it to the other person's real benefit, we are called to sacrifice ourselves, we are called to give of ourselves, even sacrifice our rights and dignity if that is what it takes. Remember, there is no limit to love and service. Jesus gave up his divinity, his dignity, his life, and his rights for our benefit.

2. [Slide 8] Kevin, I think what you are saying can be unhealthy. Shouldn't basic fairness control relationship, not the idea of submission and servanthood?

Remember, I didn't come up with this stuff. Jesus did. It's at the heart of our faith. This is how he lived and this is how he has called us to live, and this is the way to reconciliation and happiness in relationships.

Yes, I think fairness is a great goal in every relationship. But, if we seek fairness, because we are so messed up, we have a very skewed view of what is fair. We are going to talk about anger next week, and we'll go into this deeper, but let me just say this. Everyone who gets angry gets angry because they feel like something unfair happened. Have you ever been angry at someone when that was not the case? You see, when we seek fairness, we will never yield. It will just be tit for tat. If someone insults you, you just insult him back. Eye for an eye; tooth for a tooth. That's basic fairness, right? There is no mercy or forgiveness. There is just giving people what they deserve. Grace and true love are completely inconsistent with justice and fairness.

You have to remember that when Jesus came down, he showed us a new command, to love one another as he has loved us. This means to die for one another. How would that be fair? This means willing to forgive one another? How would that be fair? This means be patient with one another? How is that fair?

Fairness is not the standard we seek to live by as the followers of Jesus Christ. Now, it is never less than fairness; our standard is grace and love. Our standard is to give better than they deserve. It means to shock them with love and grace.

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“Power Play”

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Ephesians 5:21



November 9, 2014

Most relationships have issues. The way to resolve them is not to focus on fairness, but on God’s grace in your life and overflowing with that grace in your relationship with the other person.

So, in your relationship with your spouse, think about how you can bless the person, how you can serve the person for their own benefit, how you can submit to their real needs, how you can honor the other person. You don’t start with how the other person has treated you and how you should respond. That gets us nowhere in our relationships. We lead by grace, not respond in what we think is fair. This is the road to the healthiest relationship. When you demonstrate grace, it starts a virtuous cycle of grace. Grace has the power to change the person’s heart. When you receive something better than you deserve, it moves your heart. Real change happens in people’s lives and relationships improve as a result of it.

3. [Slide 9] Now, doesn’t the Bible says that husband is the head of the wife? So, doesn’t this mean that husband is the ruler and is not called to submit to his wife?

Now, I know I am walking into some rough waters. Would you hear me out on this?

I know this passage is really the only passage that could be construed to mean that husband should rule over his wife—that he has power over his wife and his wife does not have power over him, and many people have interpreted this passage to mean that.

Let me start out by pointing out what the passage actually says.

[Slide 10] Ephesians 5:21-24:

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. **23** For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. **24** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

A Mess Worth Making “Power Play”

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November 9, 2014

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

In the original Greek, verse 21 and 22 are in one sentence. It tells us to submit to one another first; then, it tells the wife to do so. The primary idea is mutual submission. Then, it tells the wife to submit and the husband to submit to his wife by loving her as Christ loved the church. And how did Christ love the church? By serving the church. By giving himself on the cross for the church. By serving our needs. To love like Christ loved is to serve like Christ served.

Now, I know this passage also says that husband is the head of the wife. But, there is what we all need to understand. Christian leadership or headship is always about serving and submitting. Remember when Jesus told us that the world seeks to lord over one another, master over one another. He said, not so with you: we are called to become a servant. Jesus' teaching on headship has nothing to do with who is the boss or who has the power in the relationship. It means to serve and submit to the needs of the others. Why do Christians just ignore all of the other teachings of Jesus about serving and submitting and focus on ruling and power because of this one sentence? And they are way off because this sentence does not even say to rule over his wife; it says to love, agape love, that's self-sacrificial and unconditional love through serving. It says to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

That's the way of Christ.

4. [Slide 11] How about in the context of employer and employee relationship? How are we called to serve when we are called to rule over our employees?

Some people say, this idea of being a servant is good teaching for maybe, pastors, deacons, and other church people. Maybe family relationships among Christians. But, when it gets to the workplace, it's a whole different power game. We can't be like the way we are supposed to be at church; we have to do what it takes to get power.

I've struggled with this question. Does the kingdom teaching of submitting and serving one another apply to non-Christian contexts?

A Mess Worth Making
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November 9, 2014

In one of our interns' meetings, we got into the issue of church organization. Should the church be influenced by the world model of organization, like corporate organization? So, is there a unique Christian organizational model? Should Christians read Harvard Business Journal and learn from it? I believe that we should. I don't believe that there is one model of business relationship that works for the business world and another model of church relationship that works for the church. I believe that the servant model of business relationship and leadership works for the corporation and the church. It works for your Christian family as well as your non-Christian family.

I think there is a lot of evidence for this.

Jim Collins was a professor at the Business School in Stanford, and he wrote a seminal business book called Good to Great. It is lauded to be one of the best organizational leadership books written. The book is based on research asking the question: why some good companies become great companies and why some good companies do not. So, he took several corporations that were pretty good but then became great companies, and tried to figure out what caused the change. One of the main things that he found was that the companies that went from good to great had what he called Level 5 leader, a leader who was humble and sought to give or share credit for the success. In essence, he showed that the best business leader was a leader who was a servant leader.

The serving one another is not just something that works in personal and Christian contexts, it works in every context.

Now, what does it look like to serve instead of rule in the context of business? I think it means effective leadership is not just about what positional power and authority you have; it is more about how much natural authority you earned from people you lead. In other words, the most effective form of leadership comes from authority that people give to people who they trust because they care and sacrifice themselves for others, they love others, they honor others, they are good to others, because they serve others, not just themselves. When people know that they are motivated to serve others and the goal of the organization, people give them natural authority.

5. [Slide 12] Where do we get the capacity to do this?

The only way we are going to do this is if we are ravished by the power of the love of Jesus. If we see the power of agape love changing us, if we see our own faults and yet, God’s unconditional love towards us, if we see the cross, if we see his love, then we will be able to do it. In the passage about submitting to one another, if you go back a few verses, the original verb is there. This was the thought that was completed in mutual submission: Be filled with the Spirit. This whole section is a subset of what it means to be filled with the Spirit. Literally, this passage says, BE FILLED with the Spirit, *speaking* to one another with psalm, *making* music to the Lord, *giving* thanks, and then it says, *submitting* to one another. So, the act of submitting is caused by the original verb: be filled with the Spirit. Allow the power of the Spirit of God to fill you and empower you. You’ve got to see that God wants to bring the power of the Kingdom of God down here. And that power is not the power to push people down, but to lift people up; it is not the power-over, but the power of the cross, the power of agape love, the power of giving, the power of submitting, the power of humility.