

Power to the People

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. So we start this morning in 1st Peter chapter 2. We read, But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into this marvelous light. Once you are not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as soldiers and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. And in Mark chapter 10, we read, And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. And he said to them, What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. Jesus said to them, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? And they said to him, We are able. And Jesus said to them, The cup that I drink, you will drink.

And with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized. But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servants. Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. This is the Word of God.

Great. Thank you, Jaya. Well, once again, good morning. Great to be with you this morning. When I was a student in South Africa many years ago, many, many, many years ago, there was, in the church kind of circles I was a part of, there was a Christian band, a worship band, that produced a few albums. In those days, CDs, if you're, you know, 20 or so, you don't know what a CD is. A CD is this thing that we used to put into a machine to play music.

Anyway, there's this band that produced a few albums. And so that's a company for the name for their band. And the name they came up with was Peculiar People. Peculiar People, which I always thought was a peculiar name for a Christian worship band. But there's something intriguing about that description for what it means to be a Christian. Christians, they were saying, are peculiar people, distinctive people, non-typical kind of people. Maybe you're new to Christianity or new to church and you think, amen to that, right? The Christians I know are strange. But the phrase actually comes from an old translation of the scripture that Jaya read to us this morning. In 1 Peter chapter 2, Jaya read to us, Peter writes and says, you, Christians, are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people that are set apart for God's possession. But in the old King James Version, it says, you are a holy, a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, a distinctive people.

[4 : 14] The book of 1 Peter is written very similar to the book of James, written to a bunch of Christians who are going through a hard time. They've had to flee their homes. And so they're living in another area of the Roman world in exile as pilgrims and sojourners because of the persecution.

And Peter writes them and says, that's a good description of the Christian life. A Christian is somebody who sees himself as a pilgrim, a sojourner in this world, knowing that this world isn't their home, but their true home is in heaven. A Christian is someone who recognizes they are passing through and exile in this world as they make their way towards their true home in heaven. And so just like James, Peter tells us that Christian, being a Christian is not somebody who simply believes intellectually some Christian things or someone who does Christian activities, like go to church. A Christian is someone who's been set apart, distinctive. That's that word, he says, you are a chosen people, a holy nation, something consecrated, distinctive, a peculiar people. Now, the question is, well, in what way, in what areas of life, what does that actually look like in the day-to-day realities of life?

Over the next three weeks, we want to talk about three areas of life that most Hong Kongers think are essential for a meaningful and satisfying life. And we want to see how the Christian faith reshapes and reframes those things and what it means to be distinctive in the areas of money, sex, and power. Okay, so that's where we're going over the next three weeks. How does our Christian faith reshape, reframe how we think of money, sex, and power? And today, we're going to start with power, and then next week, we'll talk about money, and then the third week, we'll talk about sex and sexuality. Okay, so that's where we're going. So let's dive in. When we talk about power, what do we mean? You can think about power in many different ways, but essentially, the way I want us to think about it is this. Think about the ability to significantly influence circumstances or people's behavior. When you possess power, you have the ability, the capability to significantly influence either the change of course of events or people's behavior, sometimes even against their will.

When we think of power, we often think of formalized, institutionalized power, power that's been authorized by virtue of a position or a badge or a title. So think of, for instance, a traffic officer or a police officer, right? They have great power to cause you to do all sorts of things that you don't want to do. So you're driving your car, and they have the ability to get you to pull over and stop driving, even though you're late for your meeting. Or maybe you've pulled over and stopped somewhere, and you don't want to drive, and they have the ability to get you driving, right? And sometimes they don't even need to say a word. They just wave their hand or tap on your window, and they get you to do things that you don't want to do. They hold great power. And of course, we could think about the way that this plays out in many of our lives. If you have a title or position in a company, maybe you're a senior manager, a vice president, maybe the team leader in your school, you're the captain in the cockpit, you are some leader, you hold power and authority. You have the ability to influence people's behavior or circumstances. But one of the things I want us to see this morning is that the power dynamics in relationships are often present in informal ways, far more so than even informal ways. So even though there may be no title or position or authority, actually almost all of our relationships, there are power dynamics at play by virtue of a whole lot of unwritten assumptions.

So think about, for instance, in a city like Hong Kong, something like age. Age plays a very important way that power dynamics work. Maybe you're part of a company, you've got a leadership team, or you're on a board. You all have the same title, position, but somebody is 20 years older, and what the whole board defers to them, listens to them. They carry a sense of authority, a sense of influence more significant than others. Or it could be virtue of something like, were you born in your family? Are you the oldest sibling? Are you the firstborn son? How does that play out in the dynamics of the family? Or maybe something like your biology, your personality, what kind of personality you have? Are you able to influence people? Or maybe you're a big, strong, strapping person, you walk into a room, and everyone takes note of your presence? Or maybe you're a shy person, a small person, you kind of just slink into the room, and you don't like being noticed. All these play out in the way that we relate to people. Or think about something like socioeconomic positions, your wealth, or social media. These days, there's this weird category of people called influencers, right? And companies pay them huge amounts of money because they've got a large social media following, and they can shape and influence the consumer behavior of people. Or think about something as simple as how long you've been at your firm. Maybe you're very junior, you don't have any title, any position, but you've been there two years, and someone joins, they've been there two months. Just by virtue of how long you've been there, they might look up to you.

[9 : 43] You have an element of sway or influence. So before we look at our passage, what I want us to see is that almost all of us, irrespective of your job, your position, your title, almost all of us will have ways and dynamics in our relationships where we hold influence and sway over people, their behavior, over outcomes or circumstances. And many of these invisible power dynamics are, at first they seem power neutral, but actually they are very powerful and at work. And sometimes even the informal relationships can be more powerful than the formal ones. So think of maybe you've got a boss, nobody respects them, but there's actually somebody in the team that everybody respects. The boss might have the position, but actually this is the real leader in the team. Does that make sense? Okay, so here's the question I want us to consider. If almost all of us have some kind of influence, what do we do with that? What do we do with that? How does that play out in our lives? And more importantly, how does your

Christian faith, if you are a Christian this morning, shape that or influence that? How you steward that? Today we're looking at Mark chapter 10, and if you've got your bulletin, open it up. I want us to keep it open. And what we're going to see in this passage is power at its worst and power at its best.

We're going to see power's ability to corrupt and power's ability to heal or restore. We're going to see power's ability to turn people ugly and power's ability to make ugly things beautiful again. Okay?

Now here's the big idea. Jesus Christ shows us that the only way for power influence to be a blessing and not a curse, to be something beautiful and not ugly, is to see it as a stewardship that's entrusted to us by God for the service of others and not yourself.

Jesus Christ tells us that the way that power can be a beautiful thing rather than ugly thing, to heal and restore rather than curse, is to see it as a stewardship that's been entrusted to you by God for the service of others, not yourself. What do I mean by stewardship? Well, the word steward means a custodian, a guardian. In the ancient world, an owner of estates would entrust his estate to a steward.

[12 : 06] He would go away in business maybe for a couple of months or years, come back and say, what have you done with my estate? A steward has real responsibility, real power and authority to make decisions, hire and fire people, but he acts knowing that this estate doesn't belong to me.

I'm doing this on behalf of the owner. Jesus shows us that God has sovereignly given to each one of us the ability to influence people and circumstances, whether formally or informally, but this is never to be seen as something that belongs to me. It's a gift that's given in the service of others, not myself.

Okay, so let's dive in. Let's look at power gone wrong. Now, the context of Mark, Mark is, the first half of Mark, the question everybody's asking is, who is this man? Jesus does remarkable things and everybody's asking, who is this man? Around chapter eight to nine, Jesus starts to reveal that he's the Messiah King, the Christ. And the question Mark wants us to ask is, what kind of king is he? Now, the disciples have worked out that somewhere along the line, they've worked out, okay, he's the Messiah, he's the king, but they haven't quite worked out what kind of king he is yet.

Look what happens here. Verse 35, James and John, two of the disciples, sons of Zebedee, come to Jesus and they say to him, teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.

Okay, an amazing start. Anybody starts off a conversation like that is not very self-aware. And yet, if we're honest, how many of us probably don't say to their mouths, but go into conversations, interrelationships with something like that at the back of our mind. What can I get out of this relationship, right? Jesus is so amazing. Look at his grace. He says, what would you like me to do for you? Imagine a junior employee goes to the president of the company and says, ma'am, I want you to do for me whatever I ask. And she says, sure, how can I help you? Jesus is so gracious, right? Verse 37, they said to him, grant us to sit one at your right hand and one on your left in your kingdom, in your glory. So they figured out Jesus is the Messiah King and they're seeing an opportunity for themselves. Power turned ugly. Notice a couple of things here. Firstly, notice how power has a way of seducing us, seducing us. Who are James and John? They're these two disciples. What were they?

[14 : 34] They were fishermen. Not the world's worst job, okay? Not like begging on the street, but also not super powerful and wealthy. Middle of the road, self-employed people doing fine. I don't think James and John often had political ambitions growing up. And yet somehow they make the connection, Jesus is going to be the King. And they start seeing dollar signs in their minds, okay? They start thinking, if Jesus is going to be on the throne, someone's going to sit next to him. Why shouldn't it be us?

And so they start to, it starts to change their hearts. We often hear the phrase, power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Power has a way of seducing us and changing our hearts, right?

Notice secondly, how power has a way of deceiving us, getting us to not think straight. Look at what Jesus says to them. He says, they say, grant us to sit one at your right hand, one at your left hand, in your glory. And Jesus says, you don't know what you're asking. In other words, you don't know what you're talking about. Power has a way of making us overestimate ourselves and have an exaggerated view of ourselves so that we start to become foolish, actually. I don't know if you've ever met somebody who's an expert in their field, world-class expert in their field. But then they start to talk as if they're an expert in every field, right? It's actually something that sociologists call the Dunning-Kruger effect. It's a variation of that, where someone who's an expert in their field, sometimes they underestimate how good they are in their field, but they overestimate themselves. They have an inflated view of how good they are in other fields, of which they actually know nothing about. Power has a way of making us think that we actually know more about something than we really do. You get to a position, you become promoted, you vice-president, and suddenly you think, oh, it's my brilliance, it's my genius, it's my profound understanding of the world that's got me here. But maybe it's other circumstances. And so look at our passage here. Jesus asks James and John, are you able to drink the cup that I'm able to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I'm going to be baptized? Jesus is talking about his death and his crucifixion here.

He's suffering. He says, are you able to suffer with me? And they say, sure thing, no problem. Now, just on a side note here, I want us to note, Jesus tells us here that suffering is a normal part of the Christian life and the Christian journey. If you're going to follow Jesus as King, part of that journey is going to be suffering and hardship. You're going to embrace Christ as your Lord, you embrace suffering and hardship. And there's a couple of different variations of that. On one hand, there's suffering that comes to us from people outside of us. Okay? There's evil that comes towards us.

This is called persecution, oppression. There's suffering that comes as a way of us sacrificially serving others. This is called love, right? We lay down our lives and so we embrace sacrificial suffering as we serve others. There's suffering that comes as you see the evil in your own heart and you repent and confess it. This is called repentance, right? So there's variations of the kind of suffering in a Christian life. I think what Jesus is talking about here is the second one. The kind of suffering that you take on, you embrace by way of serving others, sacrificial serving in love for others. And so Jesus says to these guys, are you able to suffer with me? And they say, yes, Jesus, we are. We're up for it. No problem. Well, it's fascinating. In just a couple of chapters later in chapter 14, two pages on, the other apostles say the same thing. Peter is having a meal with Jesus. He's lost up and he says, Jesus, I will die for you. I will suffer for you. I will do anything for you. I will never deny you. And Mark says, all the other disciples say the same thing. Well, just a couple of verses later, Jesus is arrested. And what does Mark tell us? All the disciples left him and fled, presumably including James and John. Just a couple of weeks earlier, God, we'll suffer for you. We'll, we'll, Dory, we can handle it. But now actually their exaggerated view of themselves shows them for who they really were. Here's, here's another way that suffering goes wrong. Suffering have, sorry, not suffering, power. Power has a multiplier effect. It's the ability to multiply itself. The abuse of power very seldom stops with the person involved.

[19 : 01] We see this so often, don't we? That those who are oppressed get, those who are oppressed get into positions of power. And what do they do? They oppress the next generation. We see this maybe with an abusive father. Goes home, can't control his temper, his anger, is abusive towards his kids. What does he do? He raises children that don't know how to verbalize their pain or handle their pain and they become abusive themselves. Or maybe think of a newly appointed boss or a team leader. Right? They say, finally, my hour has come. I've put up with so much nonsense for all these years. Now it's their turn to pay their dues. Or even in a more immediate sense, maybe a boss abuses a colleague. That colleague goes home, takes it out on their family. The oldest sibling takes it out on the younger sibling. The younger sibling goes to school and takes it out to the smallest kid on the playground. And that kid takes it out on the dog at home. Right? But there's this cascading effect of abuse of power has a way of multiplying itself. It's not self-contained. Friends, sin always propagates more sin. The ugliness continues. And so the question is, is there another way? Is there another way?

Now, obviously, one wrong way to respond would be to say, power is bad. Authority is bad. It just causes problems. Let's have no authority, no power. That's not a very good response. Firstly, it's unrealistic. It's just impossible. Secondly, it's always going to result in anarchy. Chaos. Okay?

That's not a good solution. So is there another solution? Friends, in this passage, Jesus shows us a better way. And Jesus shows us that the influence that we've been entrusted and given to us, whether through formal means or informally, can be used in a way that promotes wholeness and blessing and beauty and peace and joy in the world, rather than being a way that belittles people and makes them smaller. Actually, it's a way of empowering people and raising them up. Jesus shows us that the power dynamics present in all of our relationships can and should be used to serve others rather than ourselves. And the reason for this is twofold. Because this understanding of how power works is one, at the heart of God's design for the world, and two, God's rescue for humanity.

God's design for the world, and God's rescue for humanity. So let's look at those two things. God's plan for the world. Look at verse 42 to 44 with me in your Bible or your bulletin. Verse 42.

The other disciples are, verse 41, they are indignant in James and John. They're angry. Okay? The multiplier effect brings division, chaos. And Jesus calls them together. And he says to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so amongst you. For whoever would be great amongst you must be your servant. Whoever would be first amongst you must be slave of all.

[22 : 11] My previous pastor used to say, for best results, follow the maker's instructions. Okay? You get an Ikea bed, and you want to assemble it, or you buy a new coffee machine? For best results, follow their designer's instructions. Friends, God has designed humanity and our relationships and society's ways to flourish according to a specific design. Where it's not where the strong eat the weak, the rich trample the poor, the powerful take advantage of the powerless. But rather, God's design is that those that have influence and power and authority used that in the service of the flourishing of those that have been entrusted to their care. This is at the heart of the creation mandate. God gives Adam and Eve great authority over creation. He says, use this to steward, to serve it, to bless it, to see it to flourish.

When Jesus talks about the Gentiles here, he means those that are oblivious to God's way and God's will in the world. Everyone fighting to get to the top. And he says, this must not be so amongst you.

It's like Jesus saying, that's not how my kingdom works. It's not how I want you to think. No more of that thinking. Jesus says, no, you are a distinctive people set apart. You to live and behave and act differently. No more thinking like that. This must not be so amongst you. Rather, whoever desires to be great amongst you must become the other's servant. Whoever wants to be master first amongst you become the slave of all. Niels actually pointed out to me just this week how seldom the New Testament uses the word leader to describe church leadership. These days there are a million books about leadership and church leadership, but the Bible very seldom uses that word. What does the Bible talk about? It looks like shepherds, pastors, servants, slaves. The Bible says that the leadership in God's kingdom is like a shepherd, someone who rolls up their sleeves and does the dirty work of looking after, caring for, cultivating, going after people and God's people. Just think about what Paul writes in Corinthians.

He writes this in Corinthians, the church are all jostling for power. They're seeing who's the most powerful and Paul writes and says, who is Apollos, this great leader that you're following? Who is Paul anyway? Aren't we just servants, people through whom God has used for you to believe?

Later on he writes, he says, what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Christ Jesus Lord and we, who are we? Are we merely your servants? We are your slaves. He had to serve you. This is the Christian understanding of power, of authority, of leadership. In a few minutes time, we're going to be praying for Simon and Sherman as Simon is commissioned to serve as an elder at Watermark once again. He served as an elder for many years and then stepped down when they moved overseas, come back. We're going to be praying, commissioning Simon as an elder. Simon, I want to read a scripture to you in 1 Peter chapter 5.

[25 : 14] Peter writes this. Do you remember we preached on this when you were first ordained all those years ago? Peter writes, I exhort you, shepherd the flock of God that is amongst you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for self-centered gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Simon, when you are installed as an elder, it's not because you're being promoted or being honored for your great service. You're not being rewarded. You're actually being demoted to become a servant and a slave of this congregation. Not domineering over it, but graciously serving this congregation and to use your influence as a servant. I didn't hear what you said there, but friends, this is how God's upside down kingdom works. This is the design of God, that we use our influence, our positions, authority to serve as servants and as stewards.

But the other reason is this. This is at the heart of not only God's design for the world, it's at the heart of God's rescue for humanity. It's at the heart of the gospel, right? Look at verse 45 with me. Well, actually, let's read again verse 42. Jesus says, you know those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles, lorded over them, the great ones exercise authority, but it must not be so amongst you. Whoever would be great must be your servant. Whoever would be first must be your slave. Verse 45, for, here's the reason, because even the son of man, that's Jesus' way of speaking about himself, even the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Friends, in a dog-eat-dog world, in a world in which everyone is hustling to get ahead of everybody else, to trample on whoever they can, where people use their power, they influence their positions to serve themselves, Jesus not only shows a better way, but he says Christianity tells a better story.

The story is this, even God himself didn't act like this, but he humbled himself to save and serve us.

Jesus says he gave his life as a ransom for many. The word ransom means to pay the price to set somebody that's in slavery free. So think about this, imagine the story, okay?

[27 : 40] You're walking along the street, just minding your business, and a car pulls up, three men jump out, balaclavas, and they throw you into the van, and they drive off, blindfold you, and they drive off, right? And you say, where are you taking me? And they say, not for you to know. They take you to some undisclosed location, and they say, we hear your family's very wealthy, we want a ransom of a hundred million dollars. Turns out your family's not very wealthy, they've got the wrong story, but they don't believe your family, who say, we don't have the money, I'm sorry. They don't like negotiating. They say, a hundred million dollars, or we take your life. Some unknown benefactor comes and says, I've got a lot of money. I'll pay the hundred million dollars so that you can be free.

They paid the ransom price. To be ransomed is somebody pays a price that you can be set free from what slaved you and trapped you. In the book of 1 Peter, Peter writes, and he says, God has ransomed us from our former way of life, not with perishable things like to silver or gold or a hundred million dollars. That's not that important. But with his own blood, with his own life, Jesus gave his life to set us free. Friends, God, the most powerful being in the whole universe, the one who spoke galaxies and cosmos and nebulae and supernovas into being, this all-powerful God who sustains all the cosmos and the universe and the multiple universes, emptied himself of his power and his glory and his majesty, and he died on a cross, and he gave his life. And that life wasn't just as a good example. It actually was effective. It did something. It set us free from the self-centeredness of our hearts and our sin and our shame and our entrapment to death. Friends, our lives, all, every one of us, we're headed for a wasteland, a desert wasteland of barrenness, and ultimately for hell. And Jesus came and he left glory and power and majesty. And he said, I'll use my power to serve you, to set you free. Even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Christianity says that all human beings, no matter how sophisticated, how educated, how powerful and respected you are, in a profound way, we are all lost. Jesus Christ came and gave his life as a ransom.

And that's why Philippians says this. He says, friends, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but humbly consider others more significant, more important than yourself. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others. And have this mind amongst you, which is possible in Christ Jesus. Christ, who though he was in the form of God, though he was God, did not count equality with God, something to be grasped. In other words, he didn't say, it's mine, I'm entitled to it.

Rather, what did he do? He emptied himself. He took the form of a servant. God Almighty took the form of a servant and became a man, born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, what would he do?

What did he say? Okay, fine. Now's my chance to get right to my enemies. I'm going to show you. No, being found in human form, he became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[31 : 10] With all its shame, all its horror, God, the creator of the universe, hanging naked on a cross, that people could walk past and laugh and mock and scorn and ridicule, seeing him as a condemned criminal. This is what God did with his power. He hung on a cross.

Therefore, friends, God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that one day every knee will bow before him and every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord. But friends, you see what Mark is saying here? Mark is telling us that Jesus' death on the cross is not just a good example, it's good news. Jesus' death on the cross is not just admirable, it's our hope.

It's our hope for salvation, but also it's the way that our hearts can change and we really can use what's been entrusted to us as a way of serving others. Friends, if you have Jesus Christ and God, what else do you need? What power do you need? What authority do you really need to exert over others when you've got the God of the universe on your side? Jesus shows us a better way. In Mark 10, we see the ugliness of power gone wrong and the beauty of power at its very best. And we hear the good news of our deliverance, how Jesus emptied himself of majesty to come and serve us that we could be set free. So friends, what about you? How have you used the influence that God has entrusted into your care? Maybe positions of authority in the company, maybe a position in the family, maybe informal positions, just your personality, your gifting, your socioeconomic position. How have you used that? Have you used it in the service of others? Or have you used it to enrich yourself, advance your career? And what about you this week? How are you going to use it? Are you going to be like everyone else in society and serve yourself? Or will you, like Christ, use what God has entrusted to you to bring flourishing and peace and beauty out of broken things? Friends, are you going to live distinctively, differently, maybe even peculiarly, taking the abilities that God has given you and seeing them as a stewardship entrusted to you for the service of others? By Christ's grace, we can do that. Christ calls us to it and he empowers us as well. Let's pray together.

God, in some ways, such a simple message and yet so profound, God, where if we look into the deepest chambers of our hearts, God, we see that sin runs deep. Self-centeredness has its tentacles so deep. The roots of the weeds of self-centeredness, oh God, they run deep.

God, this morning we confessed our sin and we took great assurance in your work on the cross. God, this morning we ask you not only to forgive us, but to change us, to set us free. God, to dismantle the idol of power and authority and prestige and honor in our lives. God, we long for that idol to crumble and to collapse and for you to become the most important, precious thing in our lives, that we can freely and gladly give our lives away in the service of others.

[34 : 47] God, I stand here this morning and I say, start with me, God. Start with me, God. Come and change my heart. Come and change us, God. Jesus, help us to be godly men and women, different, distinctive, even peculiar. May we stand out in our society because we are more like you, God.

Lord, oh God, I pray, come and help us. By your grace and by your spirit, come and do a profound work in our lives. Pray this in your wonderful and your gracious name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.