

2021.10.24 - Radical Jesus - Power And Spiritual Abuse

Josh Siders - Tallgrass at The Well

So What? Jesus shows us how to use power for the good of others, including when to advocate for abuse victims.

Feel What? Comforted

Now What? How can we form a goodness culture in our family and in our church community?

VISION CASTING

The purpose of Tallgrass at The Well is to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

We have been in a message series called Radical Jesus where we're talking about controversial subjects in our world today. So far, we've talked about things that are creating division in our greater world, like vaccinations, refugees, and politics. I encourage you to go back and listen to those podcasts if you missed them because our pastoral team is doing the hard work of research and presenting each one in a charitable way which helps us understand to interact and, sometimes, winsomely disagree with each other.

We've started each week with a reading from scripture with the invitation to memorize it. Please read this with me:

Isaiah 40:8 (ESV): The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

This should be of great comfort to us that God's word will stand forever. As fads come and go, there is a perfect standard--a true and beautiful and good standard--that will remain forever. The standards of God as revealed through his word teaches us his ways, or those things he finds acceptable in accordance with the way he has created the world. And it reveals what is out of bounds, and where we need to return to alignment. God's forever-word is a balm to those who are hurting and it is a warning to those who wish to inflict harm. And this is elucidated in today's topic, Power and Spiritual Abuse, where we are going to talk about the responsibility of power.

When I say "power," I am talking about the capacity or ability to influence circumstances through ourselves to the role around us. We usually associate power with its negative connotations, but this is not necessary the case. We often speak of our willpower, or the intended choices to bring about personal action. And electricity carries power to light up a city or to charge your laptop so you can catch the season finale of Ted Lasso. And in each of these examples, of course people can mishandle their power for manipulative purposes and electric currents can shock. When we focus on the negative connotations, though, we can slump into a reactionary posture where we're simply anti-authority because we've seen people misuse their power so often and, perhaps, so personal to us.

Yet, we have to acknowledge the reality of the abuse of power. Abuse occurs when those entrusted with authority misuse their power to bring about intentional harm. We read headlines everyday about financial abuse, political

abuse, physical and sexual abuse. Today, I'm going to focus specifically on spiritual abuse, though this misuse of power can include many of the other kinds as well.

Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming The Gift Of*

Power: “Power at its worst is the unmaker of humanity—breeding inhumanity in the hearts of those who wield power, denying and denouncing the humanity of the ones who suffer under power. ... This power ultimately will put everything around it to death rather than share abundant life with another. It is also the power of feigned or forced ignorance, the power of complacency and self-satisfaction with our small fiefdoms of comfort. Power, the truest servant of love, can also be its most implacable enemy. ... Here is what we need to discover about power: it is both better and worse than we could imagine.”

What I find interesting on this side of the #MeToo and the #ChurchToo movements, where we are standing up for victims and calling out abusers, is that the conversation is from the outset a conversation about rights that can only be understood from a Christian view of the world.

Consider this: When Charles Darwin, among others, proposed that we as humans have been genetic descendants of single-cell organisms, he turned the scientific and religious communities upside-down. From this materialist perspective, there has been a natural selection of creatures rooted in the survival of the fittest, which means that the organism best adapted to its environment had the best chance of survival. And that meant that it's most advantageous if you were at the top of

the food chain, and your species could continue to keep up the ensure you stayed there.

In other words, from the point of nature, might makes right. I mean, have you ever tried to reason with a lion that it should get along better with the gazelles and maybe adopt a vegan way of life? Nature doesn't reason like that.

Throughout human history, might makes right has made the most sense. If you want to ensure the survival of your tribe or your civilization, it's in your best interest to have the biggest army with the fastest horses and the pointiest weapons.

But, then, along comes Christianity, covertly inserted into the Pax Romana--the Peace of Rome, buttressed by Caesar's army of course. Followers of Jesus asserted that might doesn't make right and that each of us carry the Imago dei, the imprint of God right onto us, and every person from the strongest to the weak carries personal dignity and rights. And it's the duty of the strong to watch out for the weak. This is the Way of Jesus, and the early Church shocked an empire by saying that we would rather lay down our life in love so that others could be welcomed into his kingdom.

Tom Holland, *Dominion: How The Christian Revolution Made The World:* “Dignity, which no philosopher had ever taught might be possessed by the stinking, toiling masses, was for all. There was no human existence so wretched, none so despised or vulnerable, that it did not bear witness to the image of God. Divine love for the outcast and derelict

demanded that mortals love them too. ... That every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely self-evident a truth. A Roman would have laughed at it. To campaign against discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality, however, was to depend on large numbers of people sharing in a common assumption: that everyone possessed an inherent worth. The origins of this principle—as Nietzsche had so contemptuously pointed out—lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible.”

Again, my point in all this is to say that when we campaign against abuse, we do so from a framework that God has given us in the Scripture and revealed through his Son, Jesus. Speaking truth to power and advocating for abuse victims isn't a secular idea, it's not a progressive idea, it's a thoroughly Jesus idea.

Yet this is a dilemma for the church because we're the originator of rights but we are so often not living from our own values. Spiritual abuse is particularly nefarious because pastors and church leaders are expected to model the character of Jesus and we speak God's Word to people. So, when there's abuse, the damage is often ported onto God and can have long lasting damage on the abuse victim's faith.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill

Due to hurt of churches and ministries like Mars Hill, there are many who are navigating a deconstruction of their

faith. They are wrestling with the promises of Scripture and yet the blaring hypocrisy of churches and leaders and asking themselves what they really believe anymore.

Transition: What should our posture be towards power? Should we forgo all of our influence and capacity to create, build, and organize?

No, because when we do that, when we don't use our God-given power, we also forgo our ability to speak out, to right wrongs, and to bring healing into our dark and broken world.

SOLUTION

John 8:2-11 (NIV): At dawn he [Jesus] appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and

asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus is in the midst of preaching to a crowd, which could sometimes swell into the thousands. And it's at this moment that the religious elites interrupt and set up a trap for Jesus by using a woman as a prop. They humiliate her by dragging her in front of everyone and expose her sin for all to hear. She exists in an oppressive system towards women, and conveniently forgetting that it takes two to tango and her male counterpart is nowhere to be found.

I find Jesus compelling because he embodies meekness and gentleness. He doesn't take the opportunity to humiliate his detractors. Instead of towering over the crowd as the supreme authority he is, he stoops low and slows the pace. As the crowd's energy swells as it demands a verdict, he maintains composure and invites contemplation of the situation. Jesus is fascinating because he behaves so differently than any of us would, and he masterfully navigates a tense situation and spares a life in the process.

When you read this in your Bibles, pay attention to the notation around these verses. Sometimes they're bracketed, and sometimes they're in italics. This is because in the manuscripts from the Gospel of John copied in the fourth century that modern translations use are missing these verses. Does this mean this story doesn't count Scripture? Well, not exactly.

We have records of sermons preached in the second and third centuries that reference these verses. Augustine, writing in the late 300s, speculates that it was removed because it can be interpreted as being permissive towards adultery. But he argues for its veracity because it seems so much like something Jesus would do. Some would even press the issue further saying early copyists removed it simply because these verses because it's too grace-filled, specifically, towards a woman. Church communities tended toward legalism in the third and fourth centuries and, unfortunately, propagated the kind of abuse Jesus came to undue.

In other words, this is a story about Jesus rescuing a woman from an oppressive system while at the same time rescuing her from her complicity in sin that was excluded because it wasn't harsh enough for church leaders who had lost their way. Oppressive power seeks to subjugate people for its agenda, and we must constantly be vigilant unless we fall under its sway.

Transition: But the solution isn't to disavow all uses of power; instead we need to understand how to use it well so that it honors God and infuses the world around us with restoration and reconciliation.

By looking further at the example of Jesus, the Apostle Paul helps us understand how to do just that. He tells the young church in Philippi to emulate Jesus' life:

Philippians 2:3-11 (NIV): Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own

interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Though Jesus shares all power and glory with the Father, he did not hoard it for himself. And he did not use it to bolster himself. He took the lowly position of a servant, washing dirty feet and then giving his life so we could be welcomed back into his family. This is how you use power, and this is the reason power is given: For the good of others.

Jesus used his power to disarm the devil and empty hell, and not because it benefited him one bit: But because he is love and love will have its way.

Many want power without the towel. Many see power, influence, wealth, and authority as a means to get what they want. To build themselves up and make a name for themselves. And God is clear: None of that which is build

this way will stand. None of it will be counted toward eternal rewards. But that which is meant to serve, to aid, to build others us glorifies him and will remain.

Paul says to value others above yourselves because Jesus takes the value system of the world that says take power and subjugate others and he inverts it. We have been given power by God's Spirit and we use that to put other before ourselves. And we must realize that when we live from this reality, we'll live inverted too. If you've seen Tenet, there's a strange awkwardness to those who are traveling and experience backwards—inverted.

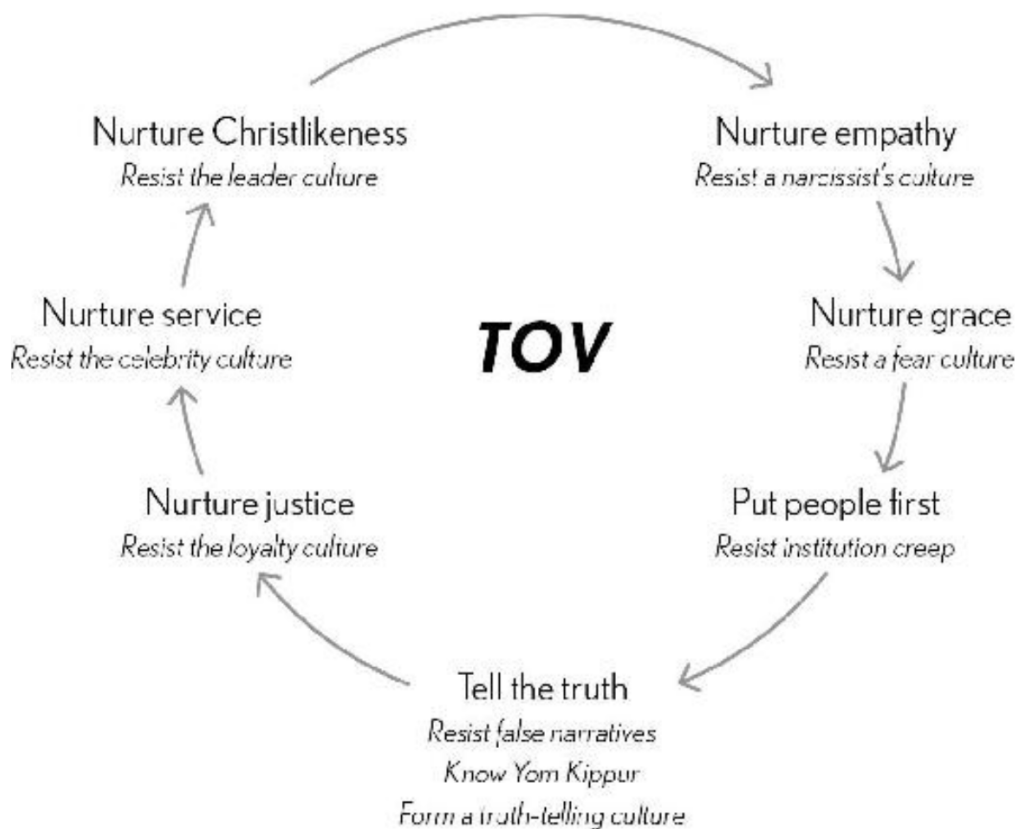
Tom Holland, *Dominion: How The Christian Revolution Made The World*: "To be a Christian is to believe that God became man and suffered a death as terrible as any mortal has ever suffered. This is why the cross, that ancient implement of torture, remains what it has always been: the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it—the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe—that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity, and of the civilization to which it gave birth. Today, the power of this strangeness remains as alive as it has ever been. It is manifest in the great surge of conversions that has swept Africa and Asia over the past century; in the conviction of millions upon millions that the breath of the Spirit, like a living fire, still blows upon the world; and, in Europe and North America, in the assumptions of many more millions who would never think to

describe themselves as Christian. All are heirs to the same revolution: a revolution that has, at its molten heart, the image of a god dead on a cross.”

Transition: It's of the utmost importance that a church look like her Savior.

APPLICATION

In their book *A Church Called Tov*, father Scot McKnight and daughter Laura Barringer write about forming a goodness culture that resists abuses of power and promotes healing. In the book, they illustrate what goodness looks like manifested in the everyday goings on of that community. And they do so with something they call the Circle of *Tov*.



- **Nurture Empathy** - We resist a culture of narcissism by becoming familiar with stories of those who are often overlooking: women, minorities, houseless, divorced, disabled, and widowed
- **Nurture Grace** - We resist a fear culture by reminding ourselves the same forgiveness has been extended towards all
- **Put People First** - We resist institutional creep by insisting that we are here to serve people, and not that people are here to serve us
 - Sarah Blakely, the founder of the company Spanx, gifted for all her employees two first-class tickets and \$10K
- **Tell The Truth** - We resist false narratives by speaking plainly and openly about things, not gossiping, exaggerating, or pretending
- **Nurture Justice** - We resist the loyalty culture by welcoming work for equality, fairness, and impartiality
- **Nurture Service** - We resist the celebrity culture by recognizing the sacrifice of everyone for the mission of God
- **Nurture Christlikeness** - We resist the leader culture by focusing on character formation, not accomplishments, as proof that the Spirit is moving in someone's life

I want to, for a moment, press this just a bit further because it's worth exploring in our own lives how we might become a part of an unhealthy church culture. We don't want to just look at problems that exist out there

somewhere, but we want to ask ourselves, ***In what ways does unhealthy culture exist in the environment around me.*** Now, I want to be clear: I'm not saying that if we take a couple missteps, we're in danger of abusing people. I don't think it works like that. But at the same time, **we want nothing to do with the tools of abuse, whether they show up in our lives as control and manipulation, or gaslighting and threatening.**

Have you seen this show up in your life? When you reach in your tool bag to pull out behavior when you're aggravated or not getting your way? Are you the husband who shoots a look at his wife that says, "Not now. Just don't even right now"? Or maybe the friend who feels upset, so you let loose a tirade of gossip to get even?

We've all been there. But the question is, are we going to stay there? Because when negative behavior arises, we want to say, Well I had a bad day. Or, That wasn't really me. But that's not exactly true, is it. Jesus said from the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. So whatever is in here is going to come out, and it's usually at those inopportune times when we feel angry, frustrated, and scared.

And the work of Jesus in our lives must so form us that we become love. Not just managing our bad behavior so we hope it doesn't happen again. But that **we become the kind of people where gentleness and meekness take shape and we become the kind of people where tolerance of abuse would never occur.**

Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*: “The trashing, demeaning, humiliating, and labeling of other believers is horrifying and grieves God. A call to truth, which we must issue, is always to be done with gentleness, humility, and dignity, for we are calling one made in God’s image. Opinions are not to govern character, no matter how strongly we hold them. Issues are not to govern character no matter how biblical they are. Character is to be rooted and grounded in likeness to Christ so that when we express our thoughts, we manifest his character and none other.”

Transition: Let me pull us back for a second and talk about us, together. How does our church community intend to safeguard against misuses of power?

1. Ben and I are moving toward a co-leadership model of pastoral ministry where we practice mutual submission at the highest level.
2. We have a robust elder team who are intentional in being not an echo chamber, but voices who speak into decision-making.
3. We have a robust process for financial decision-making that is transparent for anyone who would inquire.
4. We have systems in place for background check for anyone working with children and minors, including myself and our other pastors.

Transition: We would be remiss in failing to address any here or listening that may have experienced abuse in their life. Research shows us 1 in 4 women have experienced physical abuse. So what does Jesus offer in the way of healing?

OBJECTIONS

First, know that we're so sorry for what you've been through. We rush not with a fix, but to sit with you in grief and lament.

Next, know that it's not your fault. No one deserves to be mistreated and no one deserves to be abused.

And know that we're here for you. When you're ready, someone on our staff who is trauma-informed would be more than willing to sit with you and explore what next steps for healing might be.

Kintsugi (kent-soo-ghee) is a Japanese word that means “**golden joinery**,” and it an old Japanese practice of repairing broken pottery in a special way. **This unique method celebrates each artifact’s unique history by emphasizing its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. In fact, Kintsugi often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalizing it with a new look and giving it a second life.** When plates, bowls, and other pottery have been broken, they are rejoined together with a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum.

Kintsugi is a beautiful reminder that Jesus can and does repair our souls, even after abuse. Jesus came for the

wounded he himself holds us as we go on the journey of healing together.

Transition:

CONCLUSION

Next Step:

- How can we form a goodness culture in our family and in our church community?

Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Prayer

Invitation - Say 'yes' to Jesus

The Lord's Supper

Things not used:

- Kat Armstrong, Twitter thread about woman
- How to do better?
 - Lament before we fix--enter into pain as Jesus entered into our pain. Rebuke toxic happiness
 - Read the Bible with the oppressed (Zahnd)
- On the road to Emmaus Jesus hides himself so he doesn't overwhelm someone with truth and he walks them through their heartache