

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### Sermon series: Snapshots of a Savior

#### **Speaking to Power**

(Mark 11-12; John 13)

Study #3

#### Introduction: Power plays...

The ancient Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote, *“The lust for power, for dominating others, influences the heart more than any other passion.”*

The more modern German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, *“Wherever I found a living creature, I found the unconditioned will to power, to overpower.”*<sup>1</sup>

And John F. Kennedy explained why he ran for the position of ultimate power in the United States - *“...because [the presidency] is where the action is.”*

If you reference most any work of fiction or non-fiction, any myth or legend, book or movie, you will find embedded deep into the plot line the theme of power - its use and misuse, its abuse and its temptations.<sup>2</sup>

Take even a cursory look at the inner workings of organizations and governments and companies and the themes of power and the exercise of that power become prominent.

Muscle power, financial power, military power, political power, spiritual power. We are fascinated by power. It draws us like a magnet.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Jesus and Power*, by David Prior, IVP.

<sup>2</sup> From *The Lord of the Rings* to *Harry Potter* to the *Twilight* series to Star Wars to Shakespeare and Tom Clancy and The Iliad and The Odyssey, reference to the themes of power and its temptations are universal.

*Power preys...*

Power is attractive, but power is also dangerous. The Englishman, Lord Acton, is credited with a proverb that, sadly, rings true: Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Marching right alongside the pursuit of power is a danger. There should be a warning label attached to positions of power:

**WARNING! EXERCISE OF THE POWER OF THIS POSITION  
COULD BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR SOUL.**

Now, we give titles to those with power. We call powerful people Boss or “jefe” or President or Prime Minister. But chief among the titles reserved for the powerful is “King.”

Especially in the ancient world the King’s word was law. Kings could take what they wanted when they wanted it.<sup>3</sup>

“King” speaks of raw power - to tax, to wage war, to enslave, to bless, to curse, to let live or to condemn to death.

It is common for us to refer to Jesus as a king. And He is a king. In fact, we up the ante and refer to Him as the **“King of kings and the Lord of lords.”** (Revelation 19:16)

This morning we’re taking a third look at Jesus as we move toward Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter.

Thus far we’ve seen Jesus as a wonderful counselor and as a man who refused safety.

Today we’re exploring Jesus’ relationship to power. And at the end, we’ll have wound up with one more reason to fall at His feet in worship.

#### Speaking OF Jesus’ Power

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<sup>3</sup> See the tragic story of King David who “took” Bathsheba - because he could (2 Samuel 11)

## Those Who Recognized His Power and Authority

From the very beginning of His life, some people understood that Jesus was powerful, that He was, in fact, a king.

Herod the Great, the Roman-installed King of Israel who reigned at the time of Jesus' birth, was so convinced of Jesus' inherent kingly power that he ordered the slaughter of all the babies around Bethlehem to do away with his competition.<sup>4</sup>

The Gospel of John records Nathaniel, one of Jesus' earliest disciples, saying to Jesus, "***Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.***"<sup>5</sup>

Jesus was and is and has always has been a king. For most of His life He ruled as a king *incognito*, under the radar. But not always...

There were times when He exercised His kingly power and gave those around Him a glimpse of what He was made of.

## Jesus Flexed

*From the Gospel of John*

We see His kingly power in the Gospel of John, which is organized around seven miracles, recorded in a sort of ascending order of magnitude with respect to power.

- He turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. (2:1-11)
- He healed a nobleman's son at Capernaum. (4:46-54)
- He healed a man who had been lame for thirty eight years on a Sabbath day at the pool of Bethesda. (5:2-17)
- He fed well over five thousand men, women, and children with five small loaves and two small fish. (6:1-14)
- Immediately after that He walked ON the Sea of Galilee. (6:15-21)
- He gave sight to a man who had been born blind. (9:1-12)
- He raised Lazarus from the dead after four days in the tomb. (11:1-46)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 2.

<sup>5</sup> John 1:49 - Nathaniel said this after Jesus identified him as guileless.

*And there is more!*

Those are the miracles John records, but John doesn't include all of Jesus' mighty works of power - not by a long shot.

The other Gospels tell us of other healings and of exorcisms and the cleansing of lepers and the calming of storms - to say nothing of His own resurrection from the dead.

Jesus was a Man of power! From time to time He exercised that power in marvelous ways. And each of those marvels that He DID point to the marvel of who He WAS and IS.

He was the most powerful Man who ever lived because He was the only Man who ever lived who was also the Son of God.

I'd like for you to listen for a moment as I read part of an ancient creed of the church that states how Christians have taken what is written in the Bible and applied it to understand who Jesus really is.

It's somewhat long, so listen carefully.

## We Believe Jesus Is... (from the Athanasian Creed; 6<sup>th</sup> century)

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Essence of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Essence of his Mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ... For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ.

Wow. That's a mouthful.

We believe that Jesus was and is God in the flesh. The Baby born at Bethlehem was God. The Jesus who was grew up in Nazareth was God.

The Jesus who died on a cross was God - and rose again to prove that He was God.

For the most part, Jesus' deity was veiled while He was on earth, and not everyone "got it." Some who should have gotten it didn't want to, though. They challenged His divine power and His authority.

Some of the most bitter challenges to His power came on the last week of His life, in Jerusalem, from the religious rulers of the day.

### Jesus Speaks TO the Powerful

#### **In Response to Attempts at Entrapment**

*To some scribes and elders (Mark 11:27-28)*

On Tuesday of His last week some scribes and Jewish elders challenged His authority to cleanse the temple and to teach as He was doing. He didn't have proper credentials. He had no diploma (or even a GRE) from the rabbinic schools.

Jesus responded by answering their accusing question with a question of His own. He asked these men if the baptism of John (the Baptist) was from God, or from men.

THAT was a great question because it impaled His challengers on the horns of dilemma.

If they answered, "*From God*" - Jesus would ask them, "*Then why didn't you accept his message?*" And if they answered, "*From men*" the crowds would be angry, because the crowds believed that John had truly been God's prophet.

So, they shrugged their shoulders and said, "***We don't know.***" (Actually, they just didn't know how to answer without looking silly.)

Jesus told them that if they wouldn't answer His question, He wouldn't answer theirs.

And that's how Jesus spoke to some of the most powerful people in His world.

Shortly after this exchange, on the same Tuesday, some other Jewish leaders approached Jesus, also intent on entrapment.

These men came from two groups that were usually at odds with each other, Herodians and Pharisees.<sup>6</sup> For this occasion, though, these political and religious foes joined forces against a common enemy: Jesus.

*To some Pharisees and Herodians (12:13-17)*

After buttering Him up<sup>7</sup> they asked if the Jews, God's people, should pay taxes to the pagan Romans. We can smell the trap.

As a subject people, the Jews were required to pay taxes to Rome. Not surprisingly, paying taxes to Rome really bugged the Jews.<sup>8</sup>

So, this delegation of Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus about the rightness of paying tax to Caesar. And they thought that by posing the question the way they did, they had put Him in a "can't win" situation.

If He says "*Pay the tax*" (which the politicians, the Herodians, would have applauded) Jesus will become extremely unpopular with the ordinary Jewish citizens. (Most people don't relish paying taxes...)

But if He says "*Don't pay the tax*" (which the Pharisees would have loved) Jesus would get in big trouble with the Romans.

So, we think, "*Poor Jesus. What can He do? He's trapped.*"

Not so fast...

Just as the Pharisees and Herodians were exchanging high fives, thinking that they had finally bested Jesus, He turned the tables and told them to bring Him a coin.

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<sup>6</sup> The Pharisees were scrupulous religionists and very patriotic Jews. They wanted to see Israel restored to her former glory and to be rid of Roman domination. The Herodians (as their name implies) were linked to the Herod dynasty which ruled the Jews under the Romans. The Herodians supported Roman power.

<sup>7</sup> [14] *They came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth."* Really?

<sup>8</sup> Tax = census, referring to the annual poll tax (head tax) demanded by the Roman emperor from all Jews since A.D. 6 when Judea became a Roman province. The money went directly into the emperor's treasury.

He asked them whose image and likeness was stamped on the coin. Well, of course, everybody could see Caesar's face on the face of the coin.

Jesus said, *"Well, if his image is on it, then give him his money."* But then He continued, *"But you, give to God what has His image and likeness stamped all over it. Give Him your worship!"*

And that is how Jesus spoke to power.

Later on this same Tuesday Jesus was approached by yet another group of men who were set on questioning His authority: the Sadducees.

*To some Sadducees (12:18-27)*

#### Who were the Sadducees?

The Sadducees were another prominent group of religious leaders in first century Israel. They were aristocrats and political animals.

Among the distinctives of the Sadducees was their belief that there was no future judgment and no life after this life is over.

And to show just how silly it was to believe in a life following this life, they proposed a complicated scenario to Jesus involving what is known as "levirate" marriage.

#### The Sadducees' trap

A levirate marriage took place when a married man who had no children died. His living brother would father children by his brother's widow, thus preserving a family line and keeping a family's inheritance intact.

The scenario the Sadducees concocted had a woman marry a man who died. She then married all the other brother, seven in all, who died in succession.

Looking smug, the Sadducees asked, *"Now Jesus, in this supposed 'life after death' whose wife will she be?"*

Their hypothetical scenario was to have ridiculed belief in the resurrection. And the Sadducees believe that they've got Jesus this time.

But Jesus, who knew full well - and firsthand! - that eternity was a reality and that Heaven was way more solid than earth, calmly told the Sadducees that they didn't know what they were talking about<sup>9</sup> - *"The problem, guys, is that you don't understand God or the Bible."*

Again, that is how Jesus spoke to power. No fear. No hesitation. No bluster.

Near the end of that day of challenges, after having been approached by numerous groups of powerful leaders who weren't interested in the truth, but only in tripping Him up, Jesus issued His own challenge to those who had challenged Him.

I'd like for you to listen while I read some of one of the most caustic sermons we have in the Bible as Jesus lays into the scribes and the Pharisees.

#### **In a Last Week Speech (Matthew 23)**

***[Matthew 23:2]... "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; [3] therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. [4] "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. [5] "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men...***

***[6] "They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, [7] and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men...***

***[13] "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. [14] ["Woe***

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<sup>9</sup> It would like someone telling you, who have never been to Alaska, about the northern lights and you responding, "No way!" Or it would be like you telling someone about a trip you've taken to the Grand Canyon and having them reply, "No way is there a canyon that deep and wide."

*to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.] [15] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. [16] "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' ...*

*[23] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. [24] "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! [25] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. [26] "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. [27] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. [28] "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. [29] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, [30] and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' [31] "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. [32] "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. [33] "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?*

Notice. Jesus didn't slander His opponents; everything He said was true. He didn't resort to name-calling; He simply named them: blind guides, hypocrites, brood of vipers.

But this is how Jesus spoke to the powerful people of His day.

We're nearing the home stretch in today's consideration of Jesus and power. There is one more scene to see.

We find ourselves, again, at the last week of Jesus' life. Now it's not Tuesday. It is Thursday evening and He and His disciples have gathered in an upstairs room in a home in Jerusalem. They are there to celebrate the Passover together.

There, in that room Jesus behaves in a way that we don't expect an authority figure to behave.

### **Jesus' Power Speaks TO US (John 13)**

#### **The Setting (vv. 1-3)**

*Jesus knew what was coming*

John starts off telling us that Jesus knew full well what was coming.

*[1]...Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father*

We are not surprised to read that Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen to Him.

His whole life had been aimed at the cross. Now it was time. The hour has come. He's about to return to the Father He had left in glory when He came to fulfill His mission on earth.

Three truths steeled Him for the horror that He was about to face.

*[3] Jesus, knowing that that Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God*

John wants us to remember the love of Jesus.

So He reminds us that even though the cross was staring Him right in the face - along with the scourging and the brutal trials, and the betrayal and denials of disciples - it was the welfare of His friends that was foremost on His mind.

*Jesus loved His disciples*

***[1]... having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.***

Yes, he loved them right up until the very end. But that comment is more than a time stamp. Jesus loved His followers to the uttermost. Nobody loved the way Jesus did. His love for His disciples was the purest, the most sacrificial love they had ever known.

The same is true, today, by the way.

He promises that He will never pull the rug out from under us and remove His love. It is crucial to know that in a world of landslides and disappearing planes and and cancer and divorce and heartache, His love is solid. It is the foundation upon which we can build solid souls.

These opening words (vv. 1-3) are an important prelude to the main event that begins the evening in the upper room.<sup>10</sup> That main event was the outrageous action Jesus took of washing the feet of His disciples.

### **Feet Washed by the Ultimate Servant (vv. 3-5)**

*Unwashed feet, then and now*

In San Antonio, in 2014, we don't consider foot-washing a necessary courtesy when guests come to our homes. But, then, in 2014 San Antonio, our streets are paved, and we have designated garbage dumps.

In the ancient world, foot-washing was a service offered by a host to anyone who came to his home.

A servant (normally the lowliest servant) was given the onerous assignment of washing the feet of guests, as the task was so disgusting that the guests would not usually be asked to do the chore for themselves.

Foot-washing was necessary because of the condition of the city streets.

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<sup>10</sup> John's focus is on Jesus, of course. But he lets us know that by the time the crew had all climbed the stairs to the upper room to eat their Passover meal, Judas Iscariot had already decided to go through with his satanically inspired plan to betray Jesus.

All of us can imagine what feet would look like (and smell like!) after a long day of trudging through muddy streets in sandals.

Along with the mud, garbage was often dumped into the streets, where dogs roamed, eating the garbage and then leaving an even bigger mess behind.

Mud and grime and more were caked on to the sandals and feet of the thirteen men who came together to eat the meal in the upper room in Jerusalem.

As they entered this home, the twelve may have expected the common courtesy of having their feet washed.

But, not being greeted by a servant at the door, and not wanting to stoop to wash even their own feet, they all proceeded to the Upper Room to eat the Passover - with dirty feet.

After a certain period of time, at some point during the meal, Jesus moved to remedy the situation.

*Jesus, the powerful Servant*

***[3] Jesus... [4] got up from supper, and laid aside His garments, and taking a towel, He girded Himself. [5] Then He poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.***

He untied the sandal straps<sup>11</sup> of His disciples and started washing their grimy, filthy, smelly, sweaty feet.<sup>12</sup>

Now, how would **you** feel if you were one of the twelve apostles, and Jesus came to you with a basin and a towel to wash your feet?

Most of us here today would have a hard time letting anyone wash our feet. But wouldn't we have exceptional difficulty allowing Jesus to be

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<sup>11</sup> Remember John 1:27, where John the Baptist declared that he was unworthy to loosen Jesus' sandal strap.

<sup>12</sup> See Philippians 2:12. There, the apostle Paul describes Jesus' incarnation, which is what Jesus pictures by His act in the Upper Room.

our foot-washer? We'd be embarrassed and self-conscious. We just might do what Simon Peter did.

Jesus was making the rounds, going from disciple to disciple. We don't know how many sets of feet He had washed before He came to Peter.

### **Peter's Confusion (vv. 6-11)**

*[6]...[Peter] said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" [7] Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." [8] Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!"<sup>13</sup>*

Peter knows one thing for sure. If he was the Lord and Master, HE sure wouldn't be washing feet! Foot-washing is to be done at the door, before dinner, by the lowliest of servants. He wasn't about to sit still while His Lord performed such a menial task.

And you know - I understand where Peter's coming from. I know what He was saying. I don't think I'd like Jesus washing my feet, either.

And if I didn't say it out loud, I would have been thinking the same thing. *"Don't wash my feet, Lord. That's not Your place!"* I'll bet that's what all the disciples were thinking.

But Jesus explains that a relationship with Him is established by allowing Him to clean us up, to wash us. No washing, no relationship.<sup>14</sup>

We are washed by Jesus (spiritually speaking) when we come to faith in Him and He makes us clean. He forgives us of all sin - past, current, and future.

<sup>13</sup> You can just hear the emotion in his voice. Literally, he says, *"You shall not ever wash my feet forever!"* It's about as emphatic as he could have gotten.

<sup>14</sup> *Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." [9] Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." [10] Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." [11] For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."*

And then He continues to wash us (clean our feet) as we get ourselves dirty walking through life, making missteps, stepping in muck, sinning.

Well, after this explanation of foot-washing, Jesus went on to wash Peter's feet, along with the feet of all the other disciples. Then, He returned to His place, reclining with the twelve.

I can only imagine that everyone breathed a sigh of relief, just glad that the whole embarrassing episode was over. But it wasn't over.

Once seated, Jesus made sure that His disciples "got" the significance of what He had just done.

### **So THIS is How Jesus Uses His Power (vv. 12-17)**

*[12] So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" [13] You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. [14] If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [15] For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. [16] Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. [17] If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.*

There was never any question about who was the Leader of the group. Jesus was the Leader. And, for three years He set an example in all kinds of settings.

When He wanted to build some character trait into His followers, He first modeled it.

- He wanted them to be courageous, so He modeled **courage** by cleansing the temple of buyers and sellers.
- He wanted them to be men of prayer and worship, so He modeled **prayer** and **worship**, sometimes spending whole nights in prayer.
- He wanted them to have the grace of love, so He modeled **sacrificial love**, spending time and energy with needy people.

- He wanted them to have a robust trust in God, so He modeled **faith**, depending on God for the miraculous as well as the mundane “daily food” sorts of things.

He also wanted them to embrace **servanthood**. His passion was to see His followers known for their eagerness to serve, not to be served.<sup>15</sup>

The way of the world is to see how many servants one can collect and to rush to the top of the leader pyramid.

Jesus’ vision was to forge a community of people who would turn the pyramid upside down, who would rush to the end of the line, who would count it a privilege to serve.

So, to get across the message of the importance of serving He preached a sermon about the benefits of service. He gave a lecture entitled, “Ten Steps to Service.”

No. He modeled **servanthood**. He took off the festive garments always worn at Passover, clothed Himself as a common servant, filled a basin with water, and performed the menial service of washing His disciples’ feet.

What does the world’s most powerful Man do with His power? He serves.

### **Conclusion:**

Soon, you and I will find ourselves deluged with political advertising and maneuvering as we near the 2014 mid-term elections. Then,

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<sup>15</sup> Every New Testament writer reminds us of the danger of leaders - elders, pastors, bishops - “lording it over” fellow believers. There is no pecking order among believers. In the New Testament it is clear that those who are in positions of authority must not think that they have the right to tell others what to do.

all too soon, there will be another battle in 2016 for the presidency and other offices.

There are all kinds of reasons a candidate might choose to throw his or her hat into the ring to run for political office. Among those reasons is surely, for every candidate, an interest in power.

Power to get something done. Power that can be wielded for the advancement of an agenda. And you and I who vote will have a hand in saying who eventually gets to hold the reins of power in our nation.

And we remember Lord Acton’s words.

Writing in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he said, “*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*” (And then he went on to write, “*Great men are almost always bad men.*”)

We agree. Yes, power is certainly dangerous. But Jesus proves that power doesn’t always corrupt. A truer statement is that power always REVEALS. Power reveals what is in the heart of the man or the woman who has it.<sup>16</sup>

We reveal our love and our character by the way we wield power when it is ours to wield. We either use our power to serve others or we use others to serve our power.

Jesus, who had heaven’s power at His disposal, used that power to serve, ultimately, by “*giving His life as a ransom*” (Mark 10:45) when He died on the cross for our sins.

THAT is what a Savior looks like - and for His powerful, loving service we have yet one more reason to worship Him.

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<sup>16</sup> From Robert Caro, biographer of Lyndon B. Johnson.