

Idols of the Heart

Part 8

Luke 22:23-24

The idol of power.

The idol of power is the desire to control circumstances and/or people for self-seeking gain.

Sampson.

- *Judges 13-16*

Israelites demanding a King.

- *1 Samuel 8*

King Saul.

- *1 Samuel 9-31*

King David.

- *2 Samuel 11-12*

The Shepherds of Israel.

- *Ezekiel 34*

The religious rulers.

- *New Testament*

Diotrephes.

- *3 John 1:9-10*

The disciples.

- *Luke 22:23-24*

A culture of fear.

A culture of confusion.

A culture of control and exclusion.

The way of the Kingdom.

- *Luke 22:25-27, 6:39, 41-42, 6:40; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; Acts 17:11; John 13:35*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



Idols of the Heart, Part 8: The World: Power

Psychologist Milton Rokeach wrote a book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. He described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each one of them believed he was unique among humankind and that he had been called to save the world – each believed he was the messiah.

Rokeach found it challenging and difficult to break through and help the patients accept the truth about their identity. So he decided to put the three into a little community together to see if rubbing against people who also claimed to be the messiah might dent their delusion—a kind of messianic, 12-step recovery group.

As you might guess, it led to some interesting conversations. One of them would claim, "I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth."

So Rokeach would ask, "How do you know that?"

"God told me."

And then one of the other patients would say, "I never told you any such thing."

Every once in a while, one of them would get a glimmer of reality—never deep and never for long – but that's how deeply ingrained their messiah complexes were. Whatever progress Rokeach made was pretty much by putting them together.¹

It's a crazy idea, taking a group of deluded, would-be messiahs and putting them into a community to see if they could be cured. Buuuut isn't that what the church is? Aren't we a bunch of self-appointed lords of our own lives that are put together by God in order to be cured of that complex?

And we're not the first ones that have this problem – the disciples of Jesus are a case study. On the very night that Jesus led them in the Passover Supper – *The Last Supper* – Jesus told them that one of them would betray him. The disciples started talking among themselves, trying to figure out which one it would be, and of course that immediately led to an argument about which of them was the greatest. After all, what was more important – Jesus being betrayed and murdered, or which of them was more important? Luke tells us:

"They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this. A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest." (Luke 22:23-24, niv)

¹ Milton Rokeach, *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, New York Review Classics, 2011

The way Luke tells it, they didn't even stop to take a breath: "Who would betray Jesus? I wouldn't do that because I'm the greatest of us!"

There are many good things about the disciples of Jesus Christ that we want to imitate, but unfortunately this bad trait is one way in which we excel. Lurking inside every one of us is the idol at whose feet we worship in one way or another, and that is at the altar of...

The idol of power.

When we first hear about this idol, we think this really doesn't have much to do with us. Sure, it applies to presidents and kings, to CEO's and corporate ladder-climbers, to the rich and the famous and the powerful. But you and I – we have little power. In fact, we often feel powerless, and we feel that powerlessness contributes to our problems and stresses in life.

But therein is our issue. That feeling that we don't have *enough* power might actually be the indicator that we have a desire for power in the first place. If we lament our lack of power, we are worshipping an idol that we don't yet have. And then, like the disciples, when we *do* have an opportunity to get power, we jump on it and start competing for *more* of it.

Let's look at the problem of power, and start with a definition of the idol of power:

**The idol of power is the desire to control circumstances
and/or people for self-seeking gain.**

We don't have to think very hard to come up with examples all around us – in the arena of American politics to the atmosphere of the corner office, there are people who are always trying to gain, get, and keep power. I've seen this happen far too many times in churches, too – someone does or doesn't like something that is or isn't happening, so that person begins to gather a group of like-minded malcontents to get enough power to oust those they disagree with.

There are plenty of examples of this abuse of power in the pages of our Bibles. Of course, we could easily identify the bad guys – Pharoah, Ahab, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Nero, the beast of Revelation. But there are just also many examples of good guys gone bad with power. Let me give you just a few examples.

How about...

Samson (Judges 13-16)?

He was anointed by God to be a judge over Israel. Judges weren't like what we think of – these were leaders that God appointed over Israel to help protect the people and point them to God. Samson was one of them, and God gave him super-human power. Unfortunately, Samson used his power for his own gain, disregarding God's guidelines and satisfying his own sexual lusts.

Think about the...

Israelites demanding a King (1 Samuel 8).

They saw the nations around them with powerful kings, and they wanted in on some of that power, so they demanded a King. God tried to warn them about what they were asking and where it would lead them, but they insisted. They saw worldly power and wanted it, so God relented and gave them what they wanted – which was another bad example...

King Saul (1 Samuel 9-31).

Initially anointed by God as Israel's king, Saul began to disregard God's instructions and take power into his own hands, doing what he wanted to do as king. This ultimately led to God's rejection of him, and his reign became marked by jealousy and paranoia – particularly towards David. He attempted to kill David multiple times and even ordered the massacre of the priests at Nob.

And speaking of...

King David (2 Samuel 11-12),

...he's another one who let power go to his head. He started out great – deeply devoted to God, but he began to take pleasure in his power.

Even though he is considered a great king, there was a time he abused his power. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and got her pregnant, so he arranged for the death of her husband, Uriah, to cover up the affair, which led to grave consequences in his own life, family, and nation. He did eventually humble himself and repent, though.

Then there were...

The Shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34).

These were the religious leaders over Israel that were supposed to serve God and the people, being the bridge between them and God. Instead, they got rich and fat off the people's sacrificial giving, using power to feed their own pleasure.

Of course this carried over to...

The religious rulers in the (New Testament)

...and their story is pretty much all throughout the entire New Testament. They were so committed to keeping power that they even saw the Son of God as a threat and contrived charges against him to have him killed. They continued their

threatening, murderous ways into the book of Acts, and stirred up trouble throughout the New Testament churches.

And just in case you thought the early church was exempt, there was also...

Diotrephes (3 John 1:9-10).

This little-known church leader misused his position by denouncing others to elevate himself. He was so protective of his own position of power that he would not even welcome the apostle John into his congregation.² Sadly, his story has been repeated in churches throughout our history.

And, as we've already mentioned, there were...

The disciples (Luke 22:23-24)

...themselves in the passage from the Last Supper.

I mentioned earlier that the church today is not exempt from those trying to gain power, and churches themselves have sometimes been tragically notorious abusers of power, too, which results in the spiritual abuse of the people in those churches. Whether they start out as well-meaning or not, these pastors and churches can often end up abusing power and attempting to coerce and control their parishioners.

All abuse – no matter what form it takes (emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual) – all abuse is about one person trying to control another person. At the heart of abuse is control, and control is a power issue. Anywhere the idol of power raises its head, there is abuse happening.

So when you have a pastor, or a church, who attempts to control their people, that is an abuse of power, and it is called spiritual abuse. It doesn't matter if they're well-meaning or not – the result is the same.

Even our own history in the Church of the Nazarene has its share of this. We began over 125 years ago, and our early days were marked by our zeal to be holy people. Being holy, or being like Jesus, is still our top priority. But for the first several decades, we began to identify which behaviors were holy and which were not. What started out as warnings against potentially harmful actions and environments became rules that righteous people were expected to follow.

So sadly, for a few decades in the middle of the last century, we were known more for what we were *against* than what we were *for*. And the weapons of enforcement for infractions were guilt and ostracization.

I didn't grow up in *any* church, let alone the Nazarene Church. I started attending in high school, which was in late the 1970s. I remember one evening I was sharing the Gospel with my mom, telling her how much Jesus loves her (no one else in my family were Christians at that time. Now they all are, and mom is in heaven!). So I was

² <https://ourdailybread.org/article/abuse-of-authority/>

telling my mom about God's love, and my mom said, "That sounds great, but I like to wear makeup. And I like to play cards. And I wear pants." I was like, "So what? What does that have to do with anything?" She said, "I can't go to your church if I do those things." I said, "Who told you that?" She said that in the 1950s when she was a teen, a girlfriend invited her to a Nazarene Church, and that's what the preacher preached about. Then my mom learned she couldn't attend the youth group because she did some of those things.

Thankfully – thankfully! – by the time I was talking to mom, the church learned from those mistakes and repented of that. What were once called "Rules" became the "Covenant of Christian Conduct" – we've moved from legalism to relationship. In other words, now instead of rules, we have a challenge to be so devoted to Jesus that we don't do things that are going to hinder that relationship – or hurt our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. So now our statement says, "In listing practices to be avoided we recognize that no catalog, however inclusive, can hope to encompass all forms of evil throughout the world. Therefore it is imperative that our people earnestly seek the aid of the Spirit in cultivating a sensitivity to evil that transcends the mere letter of the law; remembering the admonition: "Test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22)"³

Now, back then we weren't the only church like that – many other denominations were, and some still are. I could, but I won't ask for a show of hands...but if I did, I wonder how many have been a part of a church in the past that was guilty of this in some way or another? In my years of ministry, there are so many people I've encountered who suffered the trauma of a harmful legalistic church experience. It is power abuse.

In my research, I came across an article that gave some red flags for churches like that⁴, and here are a few:

A culture of fear.

This kind of abuse of power thrives in a culture where people fear each another. The leaders are afraid of losing power, and those under them feel the fear and know the danger of confronting those in authority. Loyalty is over-emphasized to distract from what is really going on. Mutual intimidation lies just under the surface of what seems safe to talk about or question.

People in church should never live under a feeling of fear. We should be free to question, and we need to be free to confess in confidence to people we trust, without fear of reprisal. All are respected and accepted.

A culture of confusion.

³ Church of the Nazarene Manual, para. 28.4)

⁴ Ibid

In churches that abuse power, leaders sometimes use spiritual language that implies they have a private line to God, or that they hear from God directly – especially when it comes to what others should or should not do. The result is that the group is told to hear the teaching or prayerful decisions of leadership as if it were God himself. That kind of confusion leads to trouble.

I recall in the town where I pastored previously, there was a pastor in a different denomination who used this technique to get people to do what he wanted. He would simply say, “The Lord told me that he wants you to lead our junior high ministry.” How can a person argue with that? Listen, at this church, we might ask you to consider volunteering for something, but it’s up to you to pray about it and decide if the Lord is asking you to or not. We respect *your* ability to hear from the Lord. We’re not going to confuse you with strongarm tactics, as if we’ve got some special line to the God.

Along with these is...

A culture of control and exclusion.

When the leaders in the church are not held accountable to fair process and well-defined checks and balances, they can impose their will in ways that go beyond their rightful sphere of control. These kinds of leaders might remove a noncompliant person from the group, not for the sake of the organization but they do it as a means to protect their own leadership. They threaten people with exclusion if they don’t comply, and leaders require submission in things that are more personal than public, more cultural than biblical, and more arbitrary than reasonable. Ironically, abusive leaders often suggest that their own accountability to God places them above criticism and question, without granting the same freedom to others. This is why you often read about mega-church pastors who end up having affairs, sexually abusing people, or having toxic workplaces.

In the noise and commotion of this kind of abuse of power, these power-hungry leaders will take Scripture out of context and use phrases like “touch not the Lord’s anointed” or “obey them that have the rule over you” – taking those verses out of context to create an unhealthy fear among people.

I recall one church, where in a time of pastoral transition, the board made a decision that the membership didn’t agree with, and during a public meeting when the people asked for an explanation, the leader of the board said, “Don’t question our authority.” If that’s not a red flag, I don’t know what is.

Even when it comes to dealing with difficult people in a church, there is a right and wrong way. In my previous church, there was a woman who was new to the church, and she immediately began causing division by saying really awful things about me and the other staff and board members – borderline slanderous. She was really quite hostile, and I had no idea why – she’d just moved to our country and had only recently started attending our church.

So, I met with her to see if we could work things out. (She agreed to have another person in the church there in order for me to be accountable and for us both to have a witness). I asked her to please explain her issues because I wanted us to work through them. She launched into a laundry list of all the reasons I was a terrible person (none of which were based in true events). So I asked her, "Do you think you could ever see a time that you would feel comfortable with me as your pastor?" She said, "Absolutely not! Never!" So I said, "Well, if that's the way you feel, maybe you should consider attending another church where you *can* grow in your faith and where you *can* support the pastor."

She stormed out and told people, "Mike excommunicated me!" Well, for the record, in the Church of the Nazarene, I don't have the authority to excommunicate anybody! Nor would I ever want that authority! Now, in extreme cases, in the Church of the Nazarene, there is a prescribed system in place for the possibility of needing a church disciplinary hearing, but that is a very involved process that includes a panel of objective people who do lots of investigating, and even then, it's almost only used when some kind of civil law has been broken.

We are fully aware that we *do not control you* – we are *not responsible for you*. We have a responsibility TO you – to encourage you, pray for you, equip you in your faith and ministry, and to spur you on toward holiness and Christlikeness – we have a responsibility TO you, but we are NOT responsible FOR you – you and you alone are responsible for yourself before God. Do you understand that?

So, if you've been a part of a power-abusing church in the past, can I say something to you? As a pastor, I want to say: I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't mistake what Jesus does for the things that broken and hurting churches do. He will never abuse power; he uses his power to serve you. He gave up his power to die for you. He leaves it up to you if you want to accept his free gift of salvation or not.

The idol of power is about control and coercion.

The way of the Kingdom

...is love, which includes freedom and respect, and is evident in sacrifice and service.

Jesus' example of leadership is a corrective to abusive authority. In His kingdom, leaders think and act like servants. They hear the questions and cries of those who are hurting. They give others the consideration they want for themselves. Here's what Jesus told his disciples that night that they were arguing about who was the best leader Jesus said to them:

"The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors (*this is a condescending term used by those with power – as if their abuse of power was for the peoples' good*). But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." (Luke 22:25-27, niv)

In Jesus' kingdom, elders and deacons do not correct someone else without first working on their own faults. Jesus said:

"Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? ... Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Luke 6:39,41-42, niv)

Biblical leaders remember the Lord's words:

"The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher." (Luke 6:40, niv)

Jesus' disciples finally figured it out, as you can see in the rest of the New Testament. Listen to what one of Jesus' understudies tells us. Watch for the value the apostle Peter puts on heartfelt service to others, and make note that he wants both leaders and church members to serve God not by coercion but because they desire to.

Peter writes to fellow elders:

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2-3, niv)

Spiritual shepherds are not to "lord it over" the flock of God. Just like we don't pressure leaders into service, leaders in turn are never to intimidate, shame, or compel people to serve, to give, or to follow. If a leader did that here, they wouldn't be in leadership for long. Even when confronting false teachers, representatives of Christ are not to be authoritarian in style, but...

"must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed." (2 Timothy 2:24-25, niv)

We need to realize that it's not good for us with even the most trusted spiritual leaders to believe everything they say. We actually honor leaders by weighing their words, ask important questions, and digging into the Bible to examine their message for ourselves. Why do you think I give you an outline, a manuscript, and the Scripture references? Because I don't expect you to take my word for it. Study and see if what I'm telling you is true according to God's Word.

The New Testament book of Acts talks about the citizens of Berea because they didn't passively accept what they were taught by Paul and Silas. Instead, the Bible says of the Bereans:

"The people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth." (Acts 17:11, nlt)

The implication is clear. God does not give His leaders power and authority to control anyone, but to speak a truth that sets people free. Do our leaders have authority? Yes, but only under submission to Christ and each other. We are in this together.

And as each of us together makes this our priority, then we are the church. Not a room full of messiah-complex people, arguing about who is the greatest, but a community of people who lovingly serve one another – which is the church.

Jesus did not say, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, because of the power you have.” He did not say, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, because your man is in the White House and you’re getting the legislation you want.” Jesus did not say, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, by the way you force everyone in the church to act and think and dress in the right ways.”

Jesus did say:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35, niv)

We are committed to being a church of love, accountability, and encouragement, not a church that controls or coerces.

Amen?

Prayer

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 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.

(Philippians 2:1-11, niv)