

# CREATIVE HANDS

## What Is Power & What Is It For?

### Power in Your Hands (Part 1)

Texts: Genesis 1:20-31; 2:7; John 1:1-5; John 2:1-12

#### Cruel or Creative Hands

When I was a kid, I had a pretty serious phobia about going to the dentist. Maybe some of you can relate. One of my earliest memories in life is of tripping on my way up into a church building and landing on my front teeth on the stone steps. I think that's where my phobia about churches started too!? In any event, that little accident required some simple oral surgery that still shows up in nightmares. I see these huge hands holding pointy instruments coming down toward my face.

The syndrome got even worse later when I wound up going to a dentist who wasn't really up on that whole Novocain innovation. He would drill and drill away at my teeth without the benefit of anesthetic – though he was clearly using some. I could smell alcohol on his breath. The pain would be so piercing that I'd squirm and cry and he would slap my face to make me sit still. I know, I need to be in therapy!

The dentist I go to now, however, is something else all together. Visiting this doctor is just short of a spa treatment. I know, you want his card, but I'm not giving it out, lest he get too busy to see me! Seriously, though, this doc has the kindest chairside manner you can imagine. Just the sound of his voice makes me feel better. There is strength and steadiness and healing in his touch. I emerge from his office with a healthier mouth and a brighter smile. Where I feared the other guy, I flourish under this doc.

So, why am I telling you all this? Because I'm getting old and all I can talk about is my doctors! No, not really. I'm sharing this because it illustrates something crucial about the important topic we're delving into this season -- the subject of POWER. Like healthcare, power is all around us. It has many different kinds of practitioners and different sorts of effects and is much debated. How you think and feel about power depends a lot on who has IT -- or who has YOU -- in their hands. It's all about the hands. Are they cruel, or crazy, or criminal, or creative hands?

#### What Is Your Experience of Power?

From our childhood on, we're taught to view powerful hands with suspicion, aren't we? We're introduced to Darth Vader and Voldemort and the Dark Lord Sauron. We meet Cinderella's step-mother and the winter witch of Narnia and Cruella DeVille. Later on we learn of very real despots and dictators and even

dastardly dentists who exploit the weak and abuse the meek. Chances are there were authority figures in your life that slapped YOU in some fashion. You may have seen abuses of power in your family, your church, your job or government. You don't have to look far for these images and experiences. Forbes Magazine just released its list of the "World's Most Powerful People." Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the head of ISIS) is on the list, as is North Korea's Kim Jong-un. Vladimir Putin, is this year's Number One.

All these impressions, take their toll on us in one way or another. Consciously or unconsciously, some of us start seeing life as basically a struggle for domination. Our marriages and sibling relationships, our workplaces and social circles are a lot about who has the upper hand, the greater privileges, the superior advantage. Even the way we drive or do our recreation becomes this Darwinian or Nietzschean or reality show contest for power. In many cases, it seems a zero-sum game. There are winners and losers, victors and victims. Either you're the person who holds the drill or gets the drill. The choice is obvious for some of us. We'd rather be the person standing over others.

Or maybe we go the opposite direction. Some of us run away from power. Power seems so intrinsically selfish, corrupting, or damaging that we want none of it. We'd rather be like the kind characters in all the Hollywood movies who try to stay out of the limelight, who don't want the pressure of competing and fighting. You think: "Goodness is about the quest for peace and love, not power. Power is evil's thing." So you purposely stay away from leadership and politics and institutions and all the other risky places where power is moving. You're starting to think you might need Novocain to even sit through this whole drill on power! So here's a question to ask someone today: What has been your experience with power? Do you find yourself seeking it or avoiding it?

### **Power is the Capacity to Make Stuff Happen**

As we start to think about this subject in a deeper way, I want to touch on a few KEY IDEAS that we'll carry with us and build upon as we go through this series. All of them grow out of the text we read a moment ago from the first chapter of the Bible and they challenge the way we often think about power.

The FIRST idea I want to stress is that in its purest form, power is not evil but good. In fact, power is the good, Godlike capacity to make stuff happen that wouldn't have happened otherwise. Genesis 1 describes a moment in time, or before time, when nothing had happened. Nothing exists but God. The first words of the Old Testament are: "**In the beginning God...**" (Gen 1:1). Some of the first words of the New Testament ring similar: "**In the beginning was the Word**" (John 1:1). It's like you have shown up for worship here very early. Everything in the room is dark and quiet and completely still. But all of a sudden, through some mysterious agency, the lights come up and music begins

to play and your body and spirit and everything in the room begin to vibrate in this thrilling, even glorious way.

That's what God does, because his essence is not just love but immense power. **"I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your POWER and glory"** (Psalm 63:2) says the Psalmist. **"The voice of the Lord is POWERful"** (Psalm 29:4) he says elsewhere. and it is true. The entire remainder of Genesis 1 is an ode to the way God takes nothing and makes it something by the power of his voice and will. God says: **"Let there be light"** (Gen 1:3) and BANG, energy fills the void with brilliance. God says: **"Let there be sky and water and land and stars and moon"** (Gen 1:6-19) and these things separate and take shape and solidify and set into place. This is power in its pure original form: It's the good, Godlike capacity to make stuff happen that wouldn't happen otherwise.

John's Gospel reaffirms this idea: **"In the beginning was the Word... Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."** By his Word, God makes something out of nothing. He turns darkness into light. He gives life a place to stand and water to drink and a sky to reach for and stars by which to chart it's course. God doesn't demand "I order this!" like an earthly general. He doesn't command, "Make it so!" like the captain of the Starship Enterprise. He doesn't say: "You better do this!" like a worked up parent. God doesn't speak in the tight-fisted imperative tense at all. Instead God speaks in what is called "the jussive mood." It's an unworried, unself-conscious, completely open-handed tone.

As my friend, Andy Crouch, points out, the statement **"'Let there be' does not have to assert power, it assumes it. It does not have to impose power, it indwells it."** With the breath of his Word and the sweep of his creative hands, God simply and graciously makes room for life. God has everything within himself – all power, all glory, all sufficiency. He is within his rights to keep all to himself. Yet God says, "let there be" more life. I love how vivid this idea becomes in Genesis chapter 2: **"Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being"** (Gen 2:7). Do you see how gracious this exercise of power is? Do you see how different it is from the clench-fisted, commanding, demanding, conquering, standing over, drilling-into-others images we've come to associate with POWER?

### **Power Is For Flourishing**

But power in its original sense is not simply this gracious Godlike capacity to make stuff happen. As the Bible understands it, God uses power for an express purpose. Power is for the flourishing of creation. Listen again to the words of Genesis: **"And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth'... God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful**

**and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth'..." And God said, 'Let the land produce living creatures... the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.' And it was so" (Gen 1:20-24).**

Are you getting this picture? One of the major messages of the Bible is that God doesn't simply want to see his creation surviving; he wants to see it thriving. He uses his power to create a world of radical and replicating abundance. There's teeming and multiplying and overflowing fruitfulness. God's power isn't directed at securing himself against others. His power isn't used to celebrate himself above others. God never uses his power to exploit others. The great message of the first two chapters of the Bible is that at the root of the universe is a Being who believes that power should be used to help everyone and every good thing flourish.

Incidentally, that's the theme of the last two chapters of the Bible too. Read those chapters for yourself today. The flourishing of God's creatures is also the great focus of Jesus' ministry, as we'll explore in weeks ahead. Christ's very first miracle – the one recorded in John chapter 2 -- is all about this. Jesus takes a wedding party that is petering out and renews its life by changing mere water into gallons and gallons of the finest wine (John 2). The miracle is about the God who wants to see power used for teeming, thriving, multiplying – in short, the flourishing of his creation.

### **Power is a Sacred Trust We Will Steward Well or Handle Poorly**

And that is also why God does the most amazing thing of all. He transfers some of his power to us. Genesis 1 puts it this way: **"So God created mankind in his own IMAGE... God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and SUBDUE it. RULE over the fish... and the birds... and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Gen 1:27-28).**

Do you see what happens here? God makes human beings his image-bearers. One of the principal aspects of being made in the image of God is that we are now "rulers" as He is. We're not just by-standers to life on this planet. We've been endowed with the capacity to make it what it will be. We have been asked to give names to (as in shape the identities) of his creatures. We've been entrusted with the conservation, cultivation, and use of vast resources. We've each been empowered with the ability to be true helpmates or competitive enemies to one another. Each of us can join Christ in helping this world become the flourishing garden God intended to be or else surrender ourselves to the forces that are making it a desolated wilderness.

This is the third BIG IDEA we'll carry through this series. Power is a sacred trust

we will steward well or handle poorly. What do you want your role to be? Many years ago, when I lived in Northern Ireland, I worked alongside an amazing man named Billy Gallagher. Billy had been a plumber in his working life, but macular degeneration had robbed him of that career. He could have descended into despair or bitterness. But Billy was a follower of Jesus. So he used what power he still had left to develop a senior citizen ministry that fostered a pocket of flourishing in our desolate neighborhood.

Today that neighborhood is something of a garden again. Billy is gone from this earth now, but I often think of the impact he had on so many lives and the poem he once taught me – a poem about the sacred trust of POWER:

Isn't it strange that paupers and kings and clowns that caper in sawdust rings  
Are ordinary folk like you and me, are builders of eternity.  
To each is given a bag of tools, an hour glass, and a book of rules.  
And each must build 'ere their time has flown, a stumbling block or a stepping stone.

What is the bag of tools God has given you? Who do you know who needs a stepping stone? Will you be cruel, or overly cautious, or creative with the power in YOUR hands?

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