

POWER WITH PURPOSE

God's Design for Power
Dynamics in Marriage

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever looked for Christian resources on marriage, only to be completely overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of information that is available on the subject? Clearly, Christians care very deeply about marriage, as they should. From our perspective, however, many resources on this topic portray the roles of husbands and wives so narrowly that the primary question they end up answering for couples is “Which one of us is in charge?” Because they keep answering this question, many Christians miss whole portions of God’s glorious plan for marriage.

The central focus these resources place on authority, submission, and hierarchy is far more damaging than most people realize. There is a better way to discuss the distribution of power within Christian marriages. What if God designed both husbands and wives to bring real influence, strength, and purpose into their union—not just through structured roles but in a dynamic partnership that uniquely reflects each spouse’s contribution? This book explores that concept, inviting you to see marriage not only as a structure but as a shared calling—one in which both husband and wife possess power for the purpose of helping each other flourish.

You may have picked up this book while seeking to strengthen an already healthy marriage. Maybe you want your marriage to have purpose and direction. We hope to show you how a bad view

of power can lead even good marriages to miss out on God's best. Or you may be experiencing conflict with your spouse due to a power struggle or a misunderstanding of marriage roles. We give guidance from Scripture that may help you resolve those issues and restore health to your relationship.

One particular dynamic that we are burdened to speak about is the type of power struggle that leads to abuse. While many great resources help readers recognize and address abuse directly, our overall desire in this book is to address power problems before they turn into abuse. Power is a valuable and gracious gift that God has given to couples; we hope to provide information that will help husbands and wives use power in the way that God designed it to be used.

CHANGE FOR INDIVIDUALS

If you were to ask married couples within any modern evangelical church to explain the biblical roles of godly husbands and wives, they would most likely answer with two simple words: *headship* and *submission*. Some pastors and teachers would see this as evidence that evangelicals are winning the battle against male apathy and female dominance, which they believe have threatened to destroy God's purpose for the church and for marriage. But others, especially those whose eyes have been opened to domestic abuse cases within the church, conclude that these answers are problematic.

What usually lies behind such answers is an unbiblical view of leadership. Young men are often taught principles that elevate authority and neglect sacrifice. This gives them reason to pursue control and dominance above love, understanding, and service. They overemphasize their position of leadership to such an extent

that their marriages cease to be partnerships and devolve into dictatorships. Conversely, young women are frequently given so many applications of submission that they lose all sense of agency within their marriages. When a wife doesn't learn to speak the truth in love or develop a discerning mind and a courageous spirit, the positive influence she could have on her husband fades into the background. Focusing on submission alone diminishes the actual role she is meant to fulfill as helper.

We are passionate about addressing power dynamics in marriage because of our experience as counselors. Wives have come to us feeling crushed, silenced, and trapped by an unhealthy interpretation of submission. They often express a loss of identity, dignity, and purpose within their marriages. Meanwhile, their husbands feel anxious, overwhelmed, and confused about what it even means to be a "spiritual leader" in the home. Both spouses are perpetually struggling to function under a weight that they were never meant to carry alone or, in some cases, at all. Wives struggle to be heard without nagging or to be humble without becoming a doormat. Husbands struggle to find a balance between passivity and tyranny. They all need clarity and help.

Our need for clarity regarding power dynamics in marriage is dire. Without this clarity, we face real dangers. In our own ministry, we have seen a considerable rise in the number of Christian men who are misusing their God-given role by bullying and abusing their wives. These men have come into our offices as active church members. They know Scripture well but use it as a weapon against their wives. They are not using their leadership for the good of anyone but themselves, looking only to achieve their own desired outcomes. Wives call us terrified and confused after their husbands use the Bible to shame or mistreat them in terrible ways. Wives in these situations feel helpless, especially when they

seek solace in their churches only to be told, “You must submit.” Something has to happen on an individual level so that marriages can thrive and flourish as God intended.

OUR EXPERIENCE IN MARRIAGE

Our own marital experience informs our approach to this topic as well. In many ways we are writing the book we wish we had read at the start of our marriage. We are one of those couples that we mentioned in previous paragraphs. Engaged at nineteen with plans to pursue ministry together, we immediately began exploring what God had to say about marriage. We wanted to do our best to get it right. Not really even knowing how to study the Bible properly, we heavily relied on other resources for the answers we needed to form the foundation of our married life. We wanted so badly to please God in our relationship that we devoured an extensive amount of content very quickly.

It wasn't long before we developed pretty strong convictions about how our marriage should function. Though we learned that a husband was given authority and a wife was called to submit to him, that was the extent of the biblical truth that shaped our marital worldview. The remaining truths that we lived by came from the illustrations and examples that various authors and teachers presented as they described how those principles of Scripture should be lived out. So much of what we did focused on making sure the world around us was aware that our relationship was different. That difference, however, was demonstrated not by loving each other well but by emphasizing who was in charge. Perhaps you can relate to some of the ways in which we conceptualized power dynamics in our marriage:

I should drop everything I am doing to greet him when he gets home because he deserves my attention and respect.

If she is not consistently getting the dishes done, the right thing for me to do is to confront her about that. If I just did them myself, I would be undermining the authority I am supposed to have over her.

I really think it's a bad idea for us to move right now, but it would be ungodly and disobedient for me to disagree with my husband—God will bless me for submitting to him without question.

I know my wife has a lot more experience and gifting in the area of finances, but since I'm the head of this household, I need to be in charge of all our money—God will bless our endeavors simply because I have stepped up and taken leadership.

We spent nearly two decades of marriage operating under similar principles. We made hundreds of choices based on the framework that marriage is simply the exercise of male headship and female submission. Our story played out like that of many other Christian couples who build their marriages on a similar framework: The husband was to make the final decisions, which meant he could veto any options that he didn't think were best, while also establishing any new options that he found important. So, even though the wife could offer her input, the husband's authority basically rendered it obsolete anyway. The wife was to operate under the assumption that her husband knew what was best for her and that he was making decisions for the good

of them both. She did this by never questioning his motives, by being careful and calculated regarding when and if she shared her input, and by acknowledging that he was wise and driven by his intellect whereas she was easily given to emotion and temptation. His decisions could lead her to do any number of things: transfer the kids to a different school, buy a new car, or pack everything up and spend the rest of her life without seeing her family ever again—it didn't matter. The godliest thing for him to do was to exert his authority, and the godliest thing for her to do was to submit to the authority that he was exerting.

Our marriage experienced something of a snowball effect—though, in the aftermath, we might have described it as an avalanche. What started out as a small crack in the foundation nearly brought our relationship toppling down. Within our marriage, Dave's opinion was viewed as more valuable than Krista's, which gradually led us to operate as if Dave had all the answers and was always right. Out of that, Dave developed more and more pride, and Krista became more and more trepidatious, so the problem grew and grew over time. Over twenty years, that seemingly insignificant mistake morphed into a vital error.

We have both described our experience to each other in a similar way: God brought us right to the very edge of the worst thing that could have happened to our marriage relationship, only to snatch us back at the last moment. Through this struggle we found the motivation to reexamine Scripture and develop a crucial understanding of what marriage should really be about. The time we spent at the edge has helped us see that marriage has a whole lot less to do with who is in charge and a whole lot more to do with love. This seems so obvious to say, and yet it is so frequently missed.

In our attempt to put authority and submission above everything, we made a lot of assumptions about what God would bless and what would displease him. Much of our thinking was based on information that wasn't even in the Bible. We essentially assumed that God would bless a wife for overlooking her husband's sin just because she was diligent to acknowledge his authority and, likewise, that God would bless a husband for being foolish as long as he was diligent to take the lead. This sums up the irrationality of reducing individual marital roles to mere hierarchy when teaching husbands and wives how to live. There is only one command in Scripture that stands to get that much attention, and it is not about authority or submission. It is about love.

We would have been spared a lot of heartache in our marriage if we had given that much attention to love. We wouldn't have needed to seek our own ways of getting or keeping power. Dave wouldn't have run with the power he had, using his leadership as a means to get more. He wouldn't have gotten defensive when he felt that his authority was being threatened. Krista wouldn't have viciously clung to the small areas where it seemed that her power mattered. She wouldn't have spiraled into depression when she felt invisible and forgotten, thinking, "Maybe God just loves him more than he loves me." We wouldn't have devised little ways to exert power when we felt that we had none. We wouldn't have made decisions to benefit our own ambitions and desires. We would have sought to see and hear the other person instead of attempting to punish them when we weren't seen or heard ourselves.

The biblical use of power gives us an alternative to these approaches. The biblical use of power looks like love. It looks like sacrifice. It looks like putting the other person first so that they can be empowered. It is relinquishing our own need to attain

recognition or notoriety. It is rejoicing deep in our hearts at the success and joys of the other, not expecting anything in return—yet having the confidence that we won't be forgotten because we both have made love the foundation.

WHY YOU NEED THIS BOOK

Like us, many couples in the church have been taught about male headship and female submission. They understand that there is some power dynamic at play in marriage, but without proper discipleship they import all sorts of ideas into their conception of power. Most often, these ideas stem from worldly and even harmful uses of power. Our understanding of power is often derived from a Genesis-3 world as opposed to a Genesis-2 world. We mimic what is at play in the world due to the curse of sin rather than working to display God's true desire and purpose for power.

One of the primary principles we can draw from Genesis 2 is that God's intent for husband and wife is oneness. God determined that it is not good for man to be alone—man needs a companion. Then, to demonstrate this need, God parades all the animals in front of Adam, but “for the man no helper was found corresponding to him” (v. 20). God then takes man and from him creates a suitable companion: woman. Sensing how suitable the woman is to him, Adam immediately bursts forth into a song of praise (see v. 23), after which Moses offers us a compelling commentary on the whole event: “This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh” (v. 24).

Union, oneness . . . this was God's intent for the marital relationship. That isn't to suggest that headship didn't exist before the fall. Paul indicates that male headship and female submission were

also part of God's original intent (see 1 Tim. 2:12–13).¹ But the exercise of that headship was meant to breed unity and mutual flourishing. Likewise, the woman's use of power was originally intended for mutual flourishing. The woman is called a “helper” fit for man. This term is frequently misunderstood, and that misunderstanding is rooted in a larger and more fundamental misunderstanding regarding gender roles.

The original intent behind the teachings of complementarianism² was the understanding that the roles of husbands and wives are different in function but equal in value and worth. Often, however, wives still feel less valued and understood within their homes. In part, this feeling of devaluation persists because much of marriage has been reduced to headship and submission. When hierarchy is the only way to describe the husband–wife dynamic, then a husband can make decisions that bring him great personal gain and be praised for “leading his family well.” Meanwhile, his wife will be reprimanded if she struggles in any way to comply with her husband's “leadership.” And so *helper* becomes synonymous with *assistant* or *servant* rather than portraying the mutuality for which it was intended.

1. In this text Paul grounds his argument for male-only church eldership on the fact that man was created before woman. We believe the phrase “have authority” concerns eldership and not all instruction, encouragement, or even teaching done by women. A related passage, 1 Corinthians 14:32–35, deals with the subject of women teaching authoritatively. We know that Paul welcomed women prophesying in church, so the idea that it is “disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” must mean something more specific. We would contend that it refers to authoritative teaching via the office of elder or pastor.

2. Complementarianism is a particular theological approach to understanding gender roles in marriage, church, and society. It was first developed by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

Instruction given to a husband should include teaching him to notice his wife's longings, to empathize with her struggles (see 1 Peter 3:7), and to empower her to grow spiritually and personally. His role as leader does not guarantee he gets what he wants; rather, it allows him to use his power and position to serve his wife and build her up. His authority is given not so that he can lord it over her but as a means of lifting her up and helping her flourish.

Likewise, rather than making submission the primary focus of a wife's role, we can better describe her position by the word *helper*. *Helper* is a more accurate description of a wife's role because it was the word that God used to describe Eve when he gave her to Adam. God created woman because the man needed her help. God had a plan that required two genders instead of one to reflect himself within the world and to accomplish his great purposes. And, as we will go on to demonstrate, *helper* is a better description of a wife's role because it forms an umbrella under which all other responsibilities of a wife fall. *Submission* does not fully describe all aspects of what a wife is supposed to do, but it can be one way that a wife helps her husband.

Both of these descriptions more effectively portray the concepts of care and responsibility that we all should have toward one another as coheirs in the kingdom of God. And this, in turn, gives us a more robust understanding of both spouses' relationship to power within their marriage. A wife should focus not solely on submission but also on the influence she has within her marriage. As a helper, she focuses on strengthening, sustaining, and sharpening her husband. A husband should focus not solely on his authority but on providing support, safety, and stability in all areas of marriage. Together they focus on the goals God has given them collectively as they mutually submit to and sacrifice for each other. As they seek to honor God in this way and practically

fulfill these responsibilities, they can provide better means for flourishing within their families, churches, and communities.

Nearly every book on marriage talks about marital roles. It has been our experience, though, that most don't talk about them from a *robust* biblical perspective. They reduce these roles simply to headship and submission. They leave out important balancing terms and instructions and thus fail to put the proper emphasis on love. And that sort of reduction leads to confusion and harm, resulting in the spike of abuse within Christian marriages. That is why we need one more book on marriage.



UNDERSTANDING POWER

In 1099 the city of Jerusalem was captured by the first Crusaders. What followed was the slaughter of nearly thirty thousand Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the city in two days. The Crusades are often identified as one of the worst atrocities committed in the name of Christ. To say, then, that Christians have a strange and complex relationship with power would be an understatement. On the one hand, Jesus taught that the “meek” (NIV) or “humble” are “blessed” (Matt. 5:5). He taught us to turn the other cheek and to “pray for those who persecute” us (Matt. 5:39, 44). This seems to suggest that we should avoid the pursuit of power. And yet power is required to make something of the world.¹ The Lord gave power to humanity and called them to exercise dominion over the creation (see Gen. 1:26–28). And, as we will see, there are different types of power given to people in different roles. Power is a part of life.

1. See Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (IVP, 2013), 17.

Power has the potential to devastate, but it also has the potential to bless. It is important, then, that we think about power—particularly our use of power within the home. After all, just as power exists within the world, so it exists within marriage. All marriages have power dynamics. If we understand and use power rightly, it can lead to tremendous flourishing within the marital relationship and for each spouse individually. If we misunderstand and misuse power, however, it can have devastating consequences.

According to Scripture, power has a purpose. That purpose concerns not merely our capacities and capabilities but also the end for which those capacities and capabilities are used. Power was never intended to be used for personal gain. It was given to us by God in order to serve others, uphold justice, and reflect God's character in the world. Scripture consistently presents power as the ability to support others so they can grow, thrive, and live in alignment with God's design. In short, the goal of power is to help others flourish. That is the purpose of power, both in the world and in the home.

THE ORIGIN & DEFINITION OF POWER

The word *power* refers simply to the ability to do something. We can have power in the form of influence, control, or strength. We can have physical, social, or even mechanical power. We have the ability to maintain or hold together existing realities, or we have the ability to change those realities. A person can be powerful, an organization can be powerful, an engine can be powerful.

Relational power—which is what we are considering in this book—refers to the ability to influence, guide, or affect another person. This form of power comes into play when one individual uses their personal strength, position, privilege, or resources to

influence, guide, and affect others. Such power can be used, as we will see, positively or negatively depending on the nature of the relationship and the individuals involved in it.

Before we talk about how power can be misused and how that misuse impacts us, it's important for us to first understand what Scripture says about power itself. The Bible teaches that all authority ultimately comes from God. Romans 13:1 reminds us, "There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God." In other words, God is the one who places people in positions of authority. Colossians 1:16 expands this idea even further: "For everything was created by [Jesus], in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him." God is the only true source of power. All other power is just an outflow of that source.

So, power is not something humans generate—it is given, not earned or created. But when God gives power, his own source is never depleted, because any power someone else holds is simply a portion entrusted to them by him. Because God created all things, including systems of authority, he alone determines how power is distributed. As Job 12:23 puts it, "He makes nations great, then destroys them." Everything is subject to his wisdom and rule.

Although God gives more power to some than to others, Scripture also makes it clear that God is the ultimate authority and that he does not show any partiality. Just because one person has more power than another does not win them favor with God. Both slave and master on earth have the same Master in heaven (see Eph. 6:9). Both prisoner and jailer look heavenward for mercy. Both teacher and student look to the Bible for truth. And, as we will discuss in more detail later, both wife and husband answer to the same authority. This also means that in order to maintain wise and

godly authority, the one who has been given power must look to the Lord for wisdom. Yet even those who don't acknowledge God are still subject to his authority. As Proverbs 21:1 says, "A king's heart is like channeled water in the LORD's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses."

Authority requires responsibility, but God has ultimate control.

POWER'S PURPOSE & OUR GREAT EXAMPLE

If power is given by God, then we know it can be good. Yet to experience the benefits of power, we must think of it differently from the world around us. Jesus teaches us how to do this when he contrasts power in the kingdom of God with power in the world.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25–28)

Jesus taught his disciples this on an occasion when James and John (through their mother) were vying for special authority and power in the coming kingdom of God. Jesus showed all the disciples that power in God's kingdom is intended to be used to serve others. Those who don't know God (the Gentiles) use power to "lord it over" others—to dominate and rule them. It is not, however, supposed to be that way among Jesus's followers. They are to imitate their Lord, our great example. Though he is God, Jesus came not be served but to use his power to serve others.

This distinction between “lording” over and serving is the difference between power that is used to oppress and power that is used to help others flourish. We talk about it using the language of *power over* and *power under*.²

Those who practice *power over* elevate self and personal agenda by oppressing others. They push people down to make them and their strengths subservient to their desires. Someone who seeks *power over* may be physically harmful—abusive in the classic sense of the word—or simply dismissive of others. They may be critical, insulting, harsh, and manipulative. Others may simply think that their agendas are more important, their needs more urgent, their wants and preferences more significant. They do not necessarily intend to harm others, but their self-focus still leads to that result.

Those who pursue *power under*, in contrast, elevate others and serve their needs, concerns, and desires. They identify the strengths of others and help them cultivate those strengths. They desire to help their spouses flourish. They listen to the concerns of others, consider their interests, and make decisions based on benefiting them, not only benefiting self.

Pastor and counselor Chris Moles depicts *power under* with a helpful illustration from the world of cheerleading:

Consider college cheerleaders, in particular the male cheerleaders, as an illustration of power under. During a college football or basketball game you will often see the female cheerleaders performing amazing athletic feats such as flips or demonstrating tremendous balance while leading cheers high above the turf or court. While our attention is on the female

2. This is language that we have adopted from our dear friend Chris Moles.

cheerleaders, her ability to be seen or to be given the space to perform those amazing feats is due in part to the male cheerleader's strength. Her ability and skill are on display because of his tremendous strength and dependability. . . . In much the same way, we husbands are to use our power to support, protect, and communicate that we too are dependable and responsible with the power we have been given.³

Power under means using our power and leadership to help others flourish and use their skills and gifts well. It follows the model of Jesus, whose whole life and ministry was an act of service. The incarnation itself shows how Christ used his power for the good of others. Paul tells us this plainly.

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,
who, existing in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God
as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself
by assuming the form of a servant,
taking on the likeness of humanity.
And when he had come as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient
to the point of death—
even to death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8)

As God, Jesus had every right not to involve himself in our brokenness. He had all power and could exercise it however he pleased. His response to our need, however, was to lay down his

3. Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and Violence in the Home* (Focus, 2015), 73.

nobility and to sacrifice himself for our good. He used his power not to gain anything for himself but to give up something invaluable in order to gain for us full spiritual flourishing. He died so that we might live eternally in the presence of our Father in heaven. The incarnation is a powerful act, but it is a powerful act to serve others. Jesus uses his power to help others flourish.

From the very beginning, even before the incarnation, this was how human beings were to use our power. In fact, it was God's intention even in the garden of Eden. In Genesis 2, God entrusted mankind with authority—not for self-interest but for stewardship and service. God gave Adam the responsibility to cultivate and protect the garden, and he created Eve as Adam's necessary counterpart for sharing in the task of bringing life and flourishing to creation. Their authority was meant to reflect God's own rule—marked by care, provision, and love. But when sin entered the world, power became distorted; instead of using it for the good of others, fallen humans began to wield it for control and selfish gain. This broken use of power led to strife, division, and exploited relationships. Yet Jesus restored the original design by demonstrating that true power is found not in dominance but in humility, sacrifice, and love. In him, we see that the greatest authority is exercised not by lording it over others but by lifting them up and seeking their good.

Jesus is our example, and we are called to imitate him. Just hours before his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus gathered his disciples—not to command them but to serve them. He washed their feet, a task reserved for the lowest servant. What is striking about this passage is how John introduces it. He connects Jesus's acts of service to his power.

Jesus knew that the Father had given everything into his hands,
that he had come from God, and that he was going back to

God. So he got up from supper, laid aside his outer clothing, took a towel, and tied it around himself. Next, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel tied around him. (John 13:3–5)

It was precisely *because* Jesus held all power that he was able to serve with such humility. He directed his power to achieve the good of others. In the face of his impending death, he did not use his power to gather his forces or strengthen his defense. Instead, he used it to wash the disciples' feet. If this is how Christ used his power, then as his followers, we are called to do the same, both in our individual lives and within our marriages. Power—whether in leadership or influence—is not about control but about serving, uplifting, and encouraging one another.

In helping us understand the significance of this event, John says that Jesus had all things under his power, that he was from God and returning to God. Jesus has power; indeed, he has ultimate power—that is, divine power. How does this all-powerful God-man use it? He gets up from the meal, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes dirty feet. He serves others.

And when he has done this, Jesus teaches us to imitate him, again connecting service to power.

When Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer clothing, he reclined again and said to them, “Do you know what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are speaking rightly, since that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you.

“Truly I tell you, a servant is not greater than his master,

and a messenger is not greater than the one who sent him.
If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”
(vv. 12–17)

Jesus reminds us that he has performed this act of service as Lord. If our Master used his power to serve, then we too must use all our power to serve others. No one is above “washing feet.” Power in God’s kingdom is all about serving others such that they flourish and thrive. Jesus models this service and calls us to it as well.

If we want to imitate Christ, then we must recognize that we have a responsibility to help others flourish. It’s not merely that we want others to succeed in life and faith, though we should want that. Imitating Christ, being his followers, obligates us to use our power for service. This is his way, and this is what power in his kingdom looks like. “I have given you an example,” he says, “that you also should do just as I have done for you.”

Using power to help others flourish means that we use our strength, influence, assets, privileges, positions, and more so that others will thrive. We imitate Christ by laying down our rights in order to meet someone else’s needs. Practically, this may mean that we recognize the power of our own voice in a conversation, and, instead of dominating the conversation or ending it when our ideas have been heard, we give space for others to comment or share their ideas. Maybe it means giving someone else a chance to work on a project, even when we know that they won’t do it the way we would. Perhaps it means providing people who have limited resources with the supplies and amenities that they need to fulfill their own dreams, visions, or plans. Sometimes it may mean completely sacrificing our own desires because what we want is not best for everyone involved. There are countless ways

to use our power to help others; in each scenario we have the opportunity to imitate Jesus.

Power always has the potential, regardless of circumstances, to cause harm or promote flourishing. You may understand this on a personal level if you have ever experienced the difference between a cruel boss and an inspiring one. For a business to operate efficiently, someone has to be in charge, but the outcome is determined by whether the person in authority chooses to use their power for good or for evil. Bosses can inspire employees to work their hardest by encouraging and respecting them, or they can intentionally exploit and overwork those who are under them. When bosses choose to benefit themselves by misusing power, they are the only ones who stand to gain. It is difficult for the other individuals or the system as a whole to succeed in these conditions. The workers become despondent and frustrated, which leads to less respect and productivity overall. In contrast, using power to help others flourish has a positive impact on the entire system and on anyone who relies on that system.

What is true of power in the workforce is also true of power in a marriage. When it is used selfishly, it can only bring about minimal personal benefit while causing harm to anyone else who might be affected. But when it is used sacrificially, it can cause the individuals, the relationship, and everyone who interacts with them to experience its benefits. Using power for good, rather than evil, brings about the most flourishing for the most people.

CAUTIONS ABOUT POWER

Although the world highlights the benefits of possessing power, the Bible encourages us to also contemplate its challenges and responsibilities. The Bible says that those who are in authority

must give an account to God on behalf of those under them (see Heb. 13:17). Those who seek positions of authority, especially within the church, are held to higher standards. They must be more attentive to building their character. They must be more cautious to avoid temptation. They must live in such a way as to be an example to those they lead (see 1 Peter 5:3). Husbands are not to be harsh with their wives (see Col. 3:19), and fathers are not to provoke their children (see Eph. 6:4). Uncle Ben was right when he said, “With great power comes great responsibility.”⁴ Many people seek after power and fight for it because they want to be able to achieve their goals or be treated with respect. When authority or power falls into your possession, it is important to also think of the responsibility that comes along with it.

The Bible warns us against the allure of power. Even pastors are not immune from its clutches. Those in authority over the church can become greedy for their own gain or puffed up with conceit (see 1 Tim. 3). In times of chaos, the church will not succeed at the things it is called to do if people put themselves first and fail to honor the authority that God has established (see 3 John 1:9–10). We are told, in fact, that it is God’s power that is made perfect through our weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:9). We are meant to be weak so that God’s strength can take center stage. When we try to unduly magnify our own power, God will lovingly find a way to bring us down so that we don’t pridefully and dangerously attempt to take his glory for ourselves.

Jesus is our ultimate example, and he laid his life down for those over whom he had authority. The least we can do is to lay aside our own desires and reputations for the advantage of those God has put within our care. In following Jesus, we learn that

4. *Spider-Man*, directed by Sam Raimi, Sony Pictures, 2002.

having authority does not mean getting our own way (see Eph. 5:25). Power requires that we give of ourselves so that others might benefit.

THE MISUSE OF POWER

Although God intended for us to use our power for the good of others, sadly, we often use it to benefit ourselves. Power today is frequently viewed with skepticism and cynicism, and we can readily understand why. Sin leads many to use power for selfish gain. Writer and orator Robert Ingersoll said, “If you want to know what a man is to the bottom, give him power. Any man can stand adversity—only a great man can stand prosperity.”⁵ It is true that you will see a person’s character most clearly on display when they are handed a measure of power. Often, greater power magnifies this reality. It is dangerous to give someone power because there is always a chance that they will not use it properly.

By definition, power involves other people, and so when power is abused, innocent people are often abused in the process. This tragic reality is nowhere more painful or personal than in the marriage relationship, where misused power can wound the very person it was meant to protect and cherish.

The misuse of power in marriage occurs when one or both spouses exercise their God-given influence in ways that depart from its intended design. Remember, at its core, power is the capacity to shape the thoughts, choices, or direction of another person. In a healthy relationship, this capacity is exercised in alignment with love, justice, and mutual honor. Misuse, however, bends that capacity toward ends that do not reflect God’s heart. It

5. Robert G. Ingersoll, *Abraham Lincoln: A Lecture* (New York, 1895), 15.

distorts authority and responsibility, twisting them from means of service into instruments of self-interest.

Defining the misuse of power requires us to understand the legitimate purpose of power. Power in marriage is meant to be relationally constructive—to uphold commitments, strengthen trust, and foster mutual flourishing. When power is used in a way that undermines these purposes, it moves from being a blessing to being a curse. This shift is often subtle in its beginnings but perilous in its trajectory, as it reorients the relationship away from partnership toward control or neglect.

The misuse of power in marriage can take many forms, but it is always characterized by a misalignment between purpose and practice. The one who wields power may still possess the same position or ability as before, but the posture of their heart has shifted from stewardship to selfishness. It is this internal reorientation—rather than the mere presence of power—that transforms an otherwise neutral capacity into one that is misused. Such misuse may not always be obvious, yet it consistently deviates from the standard of God-honoring love.

A key element in identifying misuse is recognizing that all marital power is inherently relational. Power in marriage is not an isolated force but is bound up in the covenantal connection between two people. Because of this, its misuse cannot be separated from its intimate and covenantal context. This makes the stewardship of power uniquely significant: How it is exercised will either reflect or betray the sacred trust of the marriage covenant.

At the heart of the misuse of power in marriage is a failure to reflect the servant-hearted character of Christ. In the biblical vision, power is never an end in itself but is entrusted for the good of another. Whenever it departs from this design, it ceases to be the good gift it was intended to be. Understanding this reality lays

the groundwork for examining how power, when mishandled, can undermine the covenant rather than uphold it.

THE IMPACT OF MISUSED POWER

Many people have come to accept misused power as a normal part of everyday life. Some even believe that power is *supposed* to be misused. Unfortunately, we are so often led to believe that angry, dominating personalities are required for leadership that we can feel surprised to have a pleasant, supportive boss who is looking out for our good.

Romantic relationships can have a similar dynamic. Our media often portrays manipulation and coercion in marriage as humorous, normal, or even justified, rather than wrong or even unhealthy. In sitcoms, guilt-trips, silent treatment, or emotional blackmail are treated as gags rather than harmful practices. The clever wife outsmarts the clueless husband, or the cunning husband tricks his unsuspecting wife into letting him do what he wants—all for the sake of getting laughs. This makes coercion seem harmless or even expected in relationships.

These behaviors become such a regular part of our media consumption, even for Christians, that they don't set off any red flags when we see them appear in our own relationships. Rather than pursuing honesty and healthy communication, couples believe manipulation and coercion are necessary to get what they want. A proper understanding of power will see these as harmful to relational health and sinful before the Lord.

On its own, misused power has the potential to greatly harm a victim because it touches on every aspect of their human experience. The misappropriation of God's good gift of power can be

physically, emotionally, and spiritually traumatic because it affects the mind, the soul, and the body.

Misused Power Impacts the Emotions

When power is used against someone or handled in an unhealthy way, the victim may experience a sense of helplessness and anxiety that comes from being stripped of their safety, dignity, agency, and voice. An atmosphere of fear and instability results.

A spouse who is being harmed by misused power feels trapped and controlled by someone who should have been a source of guidance and care. Betrayal by a spouse causes emotional distress because it shatters trust, making it difficult to feel secure in the relationship. The wounded may question their ability to judge character and discern situations rightly. The emotional turmoil can lead to anger and resentment, particularly when justice is denied or when the perpetrator remains in the position of power.

The abuse of power often leads to shame and self-doubt as victims internalize their suffering, wondering if they were at fault or if they deserved the mistreatment they received. Victims can become depressed and self-condemning; they may even experience intense despair, especially if they can see no way out of the situation. Healing from such an experience requires more than just time—it demands the restoration of trust, justice, and a reaffirmation of one's inherent value as an image bearer of God.

Jake and Lana had been married for seven years when she started to notice that he had been asserting control over most areas of their life together: how they spent their money, who they spent time with, and even how she expressed her emotions. When she tried to tell him how she felt, he said, “You’re always so sensitive! If you really loved me, you wouldn’t question me.” When

Lana tried to express her needs by asking him to help with the kids, Jake replied, “I work hard all day. You don’t even appreciate me, or you would know how tired I am.” If she tried to talk with him about a circumstance in which he had sinned against her, he said, “You always make me out to be the bad guy.” He would flip any issues back on her, and the conversation would end with her feeling confused and defeated.

Lana gradually became more and more emotionally exhausted by their relationship. She felt as if she had to walk on eggshells when they were home together. But when she was away from him, she found herself worrying about his next assertion of power. Lana’s emotional health deteriorated as she felt unheard, unseen, and invalidated. She began to experience anxiety and a deep sense of isolation. Even though she was married, she felt completely alone. Jake’s misuse of power left her feeling trapped, questioning her own worth and afraid to speak up for herself.

Misused Power Impacts Spiritual Health

Scripture reveals God to be a defender of the oppressed, and it tells us that true authority should reflect his justice, mercy, and love. The misuse of power often leads people to wrestle with God’s presence in the midst of their suffering. They might even question why he would allow such injustice to occur. In particular, it can lead people to associate abusive power with the God who controls all things and who is all-powerful. The misuse of spiritual truths in order to gain power and control over another often distorts a person’s understanding of God, leaving them confused about his character and whether he truly cares for them. A person can be led to doubt, disillusionment, and even a crisis of faith.

Many victims of spiritual abuse struggle with guilt, shame, and fear because they have been manipulated into believing that

obedience to an oppressive spouse equals obedience to God. This can make it difficult for them to approach God with trust and confidence. Some may turn away from faith entirely, associating God with the corruption of those who claimed to represent him. Others may develop a works-based or fear-driven spirituality, feeling they must earn their worth or avoid punishment. In some cases, people remain in harmful environments, believing they are being tested by God or that suffering under unjust spouses is a form of spiritual virtue. Healing from the spiritual damage caused by an abuse of power often requires rediscovering God's true nature—one of grace, protection, and care for the brokenhearted (see Ps. 34:18).

We can turn to the Bible to see a clear example of what such spiritual damage looks like. The Pharisees used their authority to burden the people of Israel with oppressive religious rules while excusing their own hypocrisy. Jesus condemned them harshly, calling them “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27) because they appeared righteous on the outside but were corrupt on the inside. The people who followed their teaching became emotionally and spiritually exhausted as they were manipulated into believing their worth depended on rule-keeping rather than on God's grace.

These types of situations aren't limited to scriptural or even religious contexts. Many people who have grown up in legalistic or authoritarian environments or who have struggled under a spouse's misuse of power may understand the shame, fear, and distrust that burdened the disciples of the Pharisees. The instructions and training that come out of these harsh environments often lead people to abandon the faith altogether. From a spiritual perspective, the effects of misused power can be incredibly devastating. The victim may not just be physically and emotionally impacted here and now, but their soul can be eternally affected if they choose to walk away from God. This is why power of any type should be

thoughtfully considered and guarded with the utmost caution. It should never be taken lightly.

Misused Power Impacts the Body

Even when power doesn't directly produce noticeable marks on a body, it can still have serious physical effects on victims as they experience persistent pressure and emotional stress. Chronic anxiety and fear can lead to increased levels of stress hormones, which weakens the immune system and makes a person more vulnerable to sickness. Due to the body's prolonged state of fight-or-flight, sufferers of abuse can experience headaches, digestive issues, muscle tension, and fatigue. Sleep disturbances, including insomnia or nightmares, are common, as victims struggle to feel safe and at peace.

In severe cases, the physical impact can escalate to high blood pressure, heart disease, or other stress-related conditions. As they attempt to manage emotional pain, some victims may also develop unhealthy coping mechanisms, like substance abuse, self-harm, or disordered eating.

The body and the mind are deeply connected, so that when power is used to control, oppress, or harm, the physical consequences are directly linked to the emotional wounds. Some of these physical issues end up being attributed to other common factors so that blame is never directed toward the actual perpetrator. This can keep a victim stuck in a cycle of harm because the problem is misdiagnosed.

Mark and Rachel are a prime example of what happens when misused power takes a physical toll.⁶ Rachel had always known

6. Many of the examples in this book will reflect on the male misuse of power. There will be discussions of a woman's misuse of power as well, but

that Mark was a little controlling, but when they were dating it didn't seem like that big of a deal. Now that they are approaching their tenth anniversary, she is trying to remember what it felt like not to be trapped under his leadership.

Rachel used to imagine that Mark was a great spiritual leader. Even in college, he had known his Bible well, and their classmates turned to him for guidance. But what she once admired now feels like a punishment as he lords his knowledge over her and uses it to make her feel small. His ideas on authority and submission seemed a little harsh to her, but it was hard for her to disagree since he could always point directly to Scripture to prove his opinions. They read so many books on marriage that seemed to support his views as well.

Mark has never laid a hand on her, but sometimes she wonders if his actions have caused the pain for which she can't find an answer. The amount of tension she holds in her body on a daily basis cannot be good for her. Her doctor has encouraged her to consider other stress-related factors, but the rest of her life seems pretty relaxed. She loves being a mom to their two kids, she has a good group of Christian friends, and both sides of their family are supportive and helpful. Rachel doesn't feel like there is any way she could confront Mark, and she doesn't know if she even should. She feels trapped and exhausted.

CONCLUSION

Despite the horrific ways that power has been used and abused, power itself is not evil. God gave us power so that we might serve

we recognize that God has given men a greater level of power, and therefore they are often more likely to misuse it. Men, bear with us in these examples. Keep reading and see what you can learn.

one another. He models that for us and calls us to imitate him in precisely this manner. Power has a purpose: to help others flourish. That is true of all uses of power, but, as we will see next, it is especially true of the use of power in marriage.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways have you experienced the misuse of power? What makes the misuse of power so devastating?
2. What might be some benefits of power? Have you witnessed or experienced any of these benefits?
3. Can you think of any other examples of Jesus's use of power for the good of others? How does Jesus's example help you think about power differently?
4. How might this discussion of power, generally, help you to think about the use of power in marriage specifically?