

The Life of David, 2 Samuel 20, The Seductiveness of Power, 10/26/2025

Percy Shelley, the British Poet once said **“Power, like a desolating pestilence, pollutes whatever it touches.”**

Lord Acton, the British leader famously added **“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”**

That’s why knowing this tendency, Uncle Ben warned Peter Parker in Spiderman **“With great power comes great responsibility.”** Even Marvel gets theology right once in a while.

Why do they all say this? They are astute observers of human nature. We don’t just crave power — once we have it, we want more, often at others’ expense. Power waters the seeds already growing in our hearts until they bear corruption. You don’t have to look far to see it: Nixon’s Watergate cover-up, Enron’s deceit that ruined thousands, Harvey Weinstein’s abuse of Hollywood influence, or megachurch leaders who’ve used the pulpit for control and to accumulate personal wealth.

But power hunger isn’t just a problem for politicians, CEOs and wolves on Wall Street. It shows up in controlling our own little worlds.

- Needing the last word in an argument — *“If I win, I’m in control.”*
- Micromanaging others — *“If it’s not my way, it’ll fall apart.”*
- Manipulating through emotion — *“If they feel what I feel, I’ll get what I want.”*
- Resisting change and clinging to comfort — *“If I keep things familiar, I can control the outcome.”*

Whether driven by ambition, insecurity, or fear, we all can be seduced by power. And when that happens, we stop trusting God’s sovereignty and start building our own little kingdoms — inviting something dark and destructive into our lives.

Before we go further, let’s be clear: **power itself isn’t evil.** God is all-powerful, and His power is always good, holy, and life-giving. He shares power so we can bless, protect, and serve others. Beware of anyone who says power itself is evil, and we have to remove all power and authority structures, they will be the first ones grasping for power when the systems and structures come down. **The danger isn’t having power — it’s craving it or using it apart from God’s purposes.** When power disconnects from love and humility, it becomes poison.

That’s exactly what unfolds in 2 Samuel 20. In this next chapter of David’s story, the spotlight shifts away from David himself and onto two men Sheba and Joab — each seduced by power in their own way, each convinced they can take control, and each undone by it. And as we watch their stories play out, we’ll also hold up a mirror to our own lives — because the same seductive pull still whispers to us today. Our goal this morning is to learn how to recognize that whisper and how to embrace God’s view of power.

Before we step into chapter 20, let me remind you where we are in the story. The conflict in David's household goes back to David's own abuse of Power in his sin with Bathsheba in chapters 11–12. His series of choices planted seeds of chaos that have now come to full bloom. Last week, we watched David's son Absalom rise up in rebellion, forcing David and his loyal followers to flee Jerusalem. Yet in that painful exile, David was brought back to a place of brokenness before the Lord — and in that brokenness, God met him with mercy and restoration.

Absalom's rebellion ends with his death, and David returns to Jerusalem to reclaim his throne and reunite the kingdom. But as we reach the end of chapter 19, all is not rainbows and butterflies. Israel is deeply divided — like America before the Civil War — with strong tension between the northern and southern tribes. The kingdom is fragile, leadership is unstable, and in that moment of national vulnerability, a new figure steps forward — a man named **Sheba**, who sees opportunity in chaos and seizes power for himself.

V. 1 Now a troublemaker named Sheba son of Bikri, a Benjamite, happened to be there. (by the way, no relationship to the Queen of)

He sounded the trumpet and shouted, "We have no share in David, no part in Jesse's son! Every man to his tent, Israel!"

2 So all the men of Israel deserted David to follow Sheba son of Bikri.

But the men of Judah stayed by their king all the way from the Jordan to Jerusalem.

Now this word "troublemaker" is the phrase son of Belial. Belial is a term that means rebellion or chaos. Over time, in Scripture, *Belial* even becomes a proper name for Satan or the spirit of autonomy from God. The narrator wants us to understand, Sheba isn't just a cranky guy — it's marking him as a spiritually corrupt rebel against God's anointed. Sheba is acting under the same spirit of rebellion that's been at work since Eden — the seduction of power itself, to seize power on one's own terms. It's the whisper of Belial that says "You can be like God." It's the deep desire for *autonomy* — to rule ourselves, define good and evil, and sit on the throne.

And this seductive voice of Belial embodied in Sheba seduced the Northern tribes because he told them what they wanted to hear — that they could have power without submission, influence without obedience, and freedom without faithfulness. But those promises are lies. The same spirit still whispers to us with modern mantras like- "Follow your heart. Take control of your own destiny. You don't need to listen to anyone else. Be the main character in your own story. Look out for #1."

Well David rightly acted decisively on this rebellion- *4 Then the king said to Amasa, "Summon the men of Judah to come to me within three days, and be here yourself."*

Now if you have been tracking with us, you might be asking, "Where's Joab? I thought he was David's right hand man, the general of his army. He usually does these things." You're right, but

in Chapter 19 we find that David replaces Joab with Amasa. The reason? Joab had done a number of things against David's commands, but the most egregious is that David explicitly gave Joab instructions not to harm Absalom when they caught him, and yet he kills him anyway. So David said that's it, Joab is out, Amasa is in.

Now how do you think Joab's handling all of this? You think he was saying, "Oh well, the Lord blesses and takes away..." Not exactly. Much like Sheba, this man is consumed with power hunger, doing things his own way, and securing his power by any means necessary.

So Joab comes looking for Amasa to take back the power. And he finds him. **9 Joab said to Amasa, "How are you, my brother?" Then Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him.**

10 Amasa was not on his guard against the dagger in Joab's hand, and Joab plunged it into his belly,

and his intestines spilled out on the ground. Then Joab and his brother Abishai pursued Sheba son of Bikri.

And just like that Joab takes the power back through unprovoked cold-blooded murder. If Sheba's power hunger is motivated by autonomy, Joab's power hunger is motivated by control and influence. It's masked by loyalty to King David, being on the right side of history, one of the good guys, and yet he uses his position to manipulate outcomes by all means necessary. We can have the same tendencies- A leader who believes they are indispensable and uses that to control others. Or someone who thinks they are the only one with good ideas. "If everyone would just listen to me..." Same power hunger, just shaped differently.

So the chase is on, Sheba is looking to build a base of his rebellion in a city called Abel Beth Maakah, all the way up in the northern part of the kingdom, but Joab is hot on his trail, and he's determined to burn the whole city down if he needs to in order to eliminate Sheba. So he and his army build a siege ramp, basically heaping up dirt to build a ramp up to the city wall with his men. And into this pending violence and destruction comes a soothing voice of wisdom. V. 16 A wise woman from the city calls out to Joab and basically says "This is crazy, our city has been like a mother to Israel all these years, why would you destroy us just to get one man! Tell us who he is, and we will deliver his head to you." Joab cools down a bit and agrees, and sure enough, a head comes flying over the wall, and it's Sheba's. Like my grandfather used to tell me, when you see a poisonous snake you've got to cut its head off.

What this woman did, though brutal, was wisdom that resulted in peace for the whole city. The narrator wants us to see in contrast to Joab, to Sheba, this woman who had very little power, used the power she did have to serve and save her city. While Joab, and Sheba all use strength, deceit, and violence to get their way, this woman uses wisdom, negotiation, and peace. She doesn't seize power — she *stewards* influence.

Whether it's Sheba or Joab, power hunger always whispers that same deception. For Sheba, it's "*We can be our own kings.*" For Joab, it was "*I know better than the king.*"

3000 years later nothing has changed. We are still drawn to power hunger. But there is a better way, like the woman of wisdom in this passage. Francis Bacon once said, "*The highest proof of virtue is to possess power without abusing it.*" How do we learn as followers of Jesus to insulate ourselves from power hunger?

3 Truths we must embrace

#1 Embrace Power as a Sacred stewardship from God.

Psalm 75:6 No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt themselves.

It is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another. Power is not self-generated, it's not from our own innate ability. It's a sacred stewardship from God. Not an entitlement, not from our own earning. When we embrace this it results in an attitude of humility. I don't have anything to boast about. When God wants to take me out, that's his prerogative. And because it's a sacred stewardship, it means we are accountable for what we do with that. Like the wise woman of Abel Beth Maakah, **#1 Embrace Power as a Sacred stewardship from God.**

Household: Parents have the power to *shape their children's view of God* through their words and reactions. A husband or wife has the power to *build up or tear down* through tone and attention. Even older siblings have power — how they treat younger ones teaches dignity or dismissiveness.

Workplace: A management team power of the kind of work culture you have, collaboration, honesty, work life balance... or dog eat dog, deception and workaholism.

Our Resources: The person with financial resources has power to bless or exploit. The person with a voice in the community has power to advocate or to remain silent. The one with influence has power to open doors for others — or close them.

Whether in our homes, our work, our church, or our society, power is never a possession — it's a *loan*. And one day, God will ask, "*How did you use what I entrusted to you?*"

#2 Embrace Your God-given Limitations.

If power is a sacred stewardship, then the right response to that truth is humble self-limitation. John the Baptist models so beautifully in John 3:30. Once he encountered Jesus, the savior of the world, he said, "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*"

John the Baptist was at the height of his ministry when he said those words. Crowds were following him, his name was known, and even the religious elite were paying attention. But instead of clutching his influence, John *celebrated* losing it. He saw his shrinking platform not as

a loss of power, but as magnifying the one with the ultimate power, by pointing to his greatness and diminishing his own. The greatest leadership is not holding all the power at the top, but giving it away by empowering others, and eventually getting out of the way when it's your time. That's the opposite of our culture's definition of success — we measure greatness by *expansion*, not *reduction*.

I'm personally so grateful for Pastor Bo Matthews, who was sensitive to the Spirit, much like John the Baptist, didn't try to seize power at the end of his pastoral ministry but joyfully gave it away, and set up the kind of culture that would be able to embrace a new lead pastor, and a shared leadership team.

Decrease your ego → increase Christ's glory. Decrease your control → increase your dependence. Decrease your agenda → increase His kingdom.

Parents- you don't need to control every outcome in their kids' lives, and you are likely to exasperate them. Embrace your limitations and entrust them to the Lord, allowing them to make some decisions.

Leaders can't fix every problem in the church, we need to embrace our limits and empower others to do the work of ministry, leaving room for the Holy Spirit.

#3 Embrace the Servant Heart of Jesus.

Luke 22:24 A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.

Even here, in the shadow of the cross, they're jockeying for position — proving that the seductiveness of power runs deep in every human heart. **25** *Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them;*

and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.

26 *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.

27 *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.

#3 Embrace the Servant Heart of Jesus. This is the upside down kingdom of Jesus. In his kingdom, the person at the top of the ladder is the one holding it for everyone else to climb, and for Jesus he held the ladder at the expense of his own life.

Philippians 2- Didn't hold onto his power and position, made himself nothing, took the form of a servant, humbled himself to death, even death on a cross...have this same mindset.

Jesus had every right to grasp for power, but He let go. He had every reason to command, but He chose to serve. He had the authority to be exalted, but He embraced humility — and in doing so, He turned the world's definition of power upside down.

Much like the wise woman, Jesus used his power to bring us peace with God, and to cut off the head of that ancient serpent, Belial. But he did it with his blood.

In God's kingdom, the way up is always down. Power isn't displayed in how much control you can take, but how much you can serve.

When Cheryl Bachelder took over as CEO of Popeyes, the company was struggling. She could have tightened control or demanded loyalty, but instead, she asked one radical question: "How can I serve the people who serve the customers?" She started listening to franchisees, elevating their needs, and helping them succeed. In a few years, profits tripled — not because she seized power, but because she gave it away.

Bachelder, a follower of Jesus, said, *"The role of the leader is to serve the people entrusted to their care, not to be served by them."* It's not the only fast-food chicken company with a Christian leader. That's the Philippians 2 mindset.

Roommates or family: quietly doing the chore no one wants to do, not for recognition but as an act of love.

Taking time to encourage a discouraged coworker when you could just move on with your day and your agenda.

Serving in unseen ways — teaching kids, setting up chairs, visiting someone who's hurting.

#1 — Embrace Power as a Sacred Stewardship from God How are you using the influence, position, or resources God has entrusted to you?

#2 — Embrace Your God-given Limitations What power or control do you need to give away that you may be holding too tightly?

#3 — Embrace the Servant Heart of Jesus Where can you use your power this week to serve instead of to control?