

SERENDIPITY #4
THE POWER OF WEAKNESS
II Corinthians 10 – 13

I. How do you spell P-O-W-E-R?

Whether we are the subject (the one who uses it) or the object (the one on whom it is used), power is normally seen as the ability to get what one wants. To have power means to be **in control**. But is this how God defines power?

A. Machiavelli.

Five centuries ago, Niccolo Machiavelli drew an unforgettable picture of power in his book *The Prince*. Viewed by many as the pioneer work on modern power politics, Machiavelli describes how power is all that matters, and to get it one must use what ever means are necessary. While virtue and character are unimportant, the appearance of virtue and character is paramount. Image is everything. The goal is to wield power (=get your own way) without seeming power hungry. A velvet glove conceals an iron fist!

B. The 48 Laws of Power.

More recently (1998) Robert Greene has given us an updated perspective on power in his best-selling *The 48 Laws of Power*. Greene attempts to distill 3,000 years of the history of power into 48 laws. If you seek power or need to defend yourself against power, this book shows what to do. A brief survey of some of these laws reveals their Machiavellian nature.

***Law 3. Conceal your intentions.** Keep people off-balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions. If they have no clue what you are up to, they cannot prepare a defense...*

***Law 6. Court attention at all cost.** Everything is judged by its appearance: what is unseen counts for nothing... Be conspicuous, at all cost. Make yourself a magnet of attention by appearing larger, more colorful, more mysterious than the bland and timid masses.*

***Law 7. Get others to do the work for you, but always take the credit.** Use the wisdom, knowledge, and legwork of other people to further your own cause... In the end, your helpers will be forgotten and you will be remembered. Never do yourself what others can do for you.*

***Law 10. Infection: avoid the unhappy and unlucky.** You can die from someone else's misery – emotional states are as infectious as diseases. You may feel you are helping the drowning man, but you are only*

precipitating your own disaster.... Associate with the happy and fortunate instead.

Law 12. Use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victim. *One sincere and honest move will cover over dozens of dishonest ones... Once your selective honesty opens a hole in their armor, you can deceive and manipulate them at will. A timely gift – a Trojan horse – will serve the same purpose.*

Law 14. Pose as a friend, work as a spy. *Knowing about your rival is critical. Use spies to gather valuable information that will keep you a step ahead. Better still: Play the spy yourself. In polite social encounters, learn to probe. Ask indirect questions to get people to reveal their weaknesses and intentions.*

Law 15. Crush your enemy totally.... *More is lost through stopping halfway than through total annihilation: the enemy will recover, and will seek revenge. Crush him, not only in body but in spirit.*

Law 20. Do not commit to anyone. *It is the fool who always rushes to take sides. Do not commit to any side or cause but yourself. By maintaining your independence, you become the master of others – playing people against one another, making them pursue you.*

Law 21. Play the sucker to catch a sucker – seem dumber than your mark. *No one likes feeling stupider than the next person. The trick, then, is to make your victims feel smart – and not just smart, but smarter than you are. Once convinced of this, they will never suspect that you may have ulterior motives.*

Law 33. Discover each man's thumbscrew. *Everyone has a weakness, a gap in the castle wall. That weakness is usually an insecurity, an uncontrollable emotion or need; it can also be a small secret pleasure. Either way, once found, it is a thumbscrew you can turn to your advantage.*

Law 37. Create compelling spectacles. *Striking imagery and grand symbolic gestures create the aura of power – everyone responds to them. Stage spectacles for those around you, then, full of arresting visuals and radiant symbols that heighten your presence. Dazzled by appearances, no one will notice what you are really doing.*

Law 48. Assume formlessness. *By taking a shape, by having a visible plan, you open yourself to attack. Instead of taking a form for your enemy to grasp, keep yourself adaptable and on the move.... The best way to protect yourself is to be as fluid and formless as water....*

II. II Corinthians 10 – 13.

A. Background.

We can assume that before he met Christ, Paul had a worldly (Machiavellian) understanding of power. However, the **cross** of Christ changed everything. Here was a form of power he had never encountered before.

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is **the power of God**. (I Cor. 1:18).*

In these four chapters (II Corinthians 10-13) we gain an insight into Paul's understanding of power (both when he was the object of other's power... and when he wielded power himself.)

Paul was the founder and first pastor of the church in Corinth (see Acts 18). However, after his departure, the church experienced many struggles, especially divisions caused by other teachers and preachers who came and worked among the congregation. Some of these "ministers" claimed great authority for themselves and preached a message that created a spirit quite different from what the church had experienced under Paul. These "super-apostles" (11:5; 12:11) were hostile to Paul and severe in their criticism of him and his ministry.

The question for us is this: How did Paul respond to such hostile attacks? How did he defend himself and his ministry? As we answer this question, we begin to understand Paul's conception of power.

B. The marks of a false gospel.

This passage gives us a very good picture of what a false gospel looks like. While preaching "Jesus," it **undermines** the truth of the Gospel. This was the situation Paul had to confront in Corinth. The conflict exposed the "**worldly power**" of the false prophets and the "**godly power**" of Paul. The passage highlights seven characteristics of a false gospel.

1) A false gospel is promoted by "**super-apostles**."

This is Paul's sarcastic way of referring to the false preachers who had infiltrated the church and stolen the hearts of the people. Twice Paul speaks of "super-apostles" (*The Message*, "big shot apostles").

- *But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles" (11:5).*

- *...for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing. (12:11).*

Though these "super-apostles" were operating in the spiritual realm, their understanding of power was completely worldly and carnal. Their leadership would look similar to leadership in politics, business, etc. It would be measured by:

- Control (getting what I want).
- Numbers (attendance, budgets, size, etc.).
- Success, popularity and fame.
- Health, wealth and happiness.
- Being on top.
- Being served.

2) It permits (even encourages) **self-promotion**.

- *We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. (10:12a).*
- *Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. (11:18).*

A false gospel leaves the self in control. Self-esteem and self-actualization are all important. "Super-apostles" will work hard to spiritualize these realities and coat them in God-talk. But the inner reality after "conversion" has changed little from that before: the self is **central**.

3) It permits (even encourages) us to compare ourselves with **one another**.

When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. (10:12b).

For those who have put their faith in a false gospel, **competition** is the name of the game. The goal is to be more spiritual (have more blessings) than the next super-apostle.

4) Super-apostles **use and abuse** their followers... and their followers seem to like it this way.

In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. (11:20).

A false gospel will always produce a dysfunctional church where relationships are unhealthy and damaging. The sheep become **co-dependent** on their leaders.

5) A false gospel will exalt **prosperity**.

The goal of "salvation" becomes health, wealth and happiness. This will be most obvious in the lives of those who lead the flock. Because they have become healthy, wealthy and happy... they are, therefore, **the model** for others to follow.

Though not stated directly, we can easily infer what the "super-apostles" in Corinth must have been like by reading between the lines.

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. (11:7-9).

¹⁴ Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? (12:14-15).

Paul's message was no prosperity gospel, and his lifestyle was humble. No wonder Paul could say:

- *Imitate me... (I Cor. 4:16).*
- *Follow my example... (I Cor. 11:1).*
- *See Phillipians 3:17; 4:9; I Thess. 1:6; II Thess. 3:7,9).*

6) A false gospel permits **loose morals** and does not promote holiness.

Super-apostles are characteristically marked by loose morals when it comes to **money** and **sex**. What they allow in their own lives will often be seen duplicated in the lives of their followers. They do not produce saints.

For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented

of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged. (12:20-21).

7) This false gospel is **no gospel at all!**

What Paul is describing here is not just different styles or flavors of the Gospel, but rather a false gospel, which is no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-9). When preachers promote this kind of ministry, don't be deceived. They are ministers of **Satan!**

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. (11:13-15).

Paul describes this "other gospel" for us:

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. (11:4).

a) It preaches "another **Jesus.**"

Though this gospel will talk a lot about Jesus, listen carefully. You will discover that the "Jesus" preached is not the one we meet in the four Gospels of the New Testament.

b) It exudes "another **spirit.**"

By "spirit" Paul is not likely referring to the Holy Spirit, but rather to the atmosphere and tone generated by the message preached. When these super-apostles minister, there is a tone (spirit) of hyper-spirituality and worldly standards.

By contrast, the true Gospel will always produce the spirit of the One who brings the Gospel. This is why Paul begins this section with the words: *By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you... (10:1).*

c) Indeed, it is a "different **gospel.**"

Though this "gospel" will talk a lot about Jesus, miracles, faith, blessings and power, you will discover certain themes are subtly down-played or missing all together (the cross, self-surrender,

humility, suffering, etc.). Richard Niebuhr famously described liberal theology some years ago:

*"A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." (Quoted in *What's So Great About Christianity?* by Dinesh D'Souza. P. 3).*

Conclusion: **Examine yourself!**

⁵ *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? (13:5).*

TABLE TALK

1. Have you ever encountered "another gospel?" Describe the "Jesus" that was preached and the "spirit" (atmosphere, tone) that was present.
2. How can someone discern the true Gospel from a counterfeit?
3. Look through the seven characteristics of the false gospel being preached in Corinth by the "super-apostles."
 - Are any of these characteristics evident in the "gospel" you believe?
 - Are some of these characteristics present in the church you attend?
4. Examine yourselves! Test yourselves! How would someone know if they failed to pass the test? Ask yourself:
 - Do I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?
 - Have I experienced inner and outer transformation through knowing Him?
 - Does the word "holy" describe my heart and life?
 - Am I doing the will of God?
 - If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?
 - Can you discern truth from error?

C. How Paul defends himself.

Paul and his Gospel were under attack in Corinth. Was he a true apostle? Was the message he preached the authentic Gospel?

The great danger when someone is being criticized is to fight back with the same weapons that are being used in the attack..

- If you attack my motives and character, then I'll attack yours.
- If you try to sway the audience to your side, then I'll try to sway them to mine.
- If you display your credentials, then I'll display mine.
- If you sling mud, I'll sling it back.
- If you brazenly promote yourself, I'll do you one better.
- If you play spiritual one-upmanship, then I can play that game, too.

How would Paul respond? The weapons his enemy fought with were powerful (Machiavellian) and threatened the very Gospel itself! Because the truth of the Gospel was hanging in the balance, Paul knew he had to respond. **Silence** was not an option. But his counter-attack would be very different.

1) Choice of **weapons**.

Paul knows that in fighting the dragon there is the danger of **becoming a dragon yourself!** Yes, he will fight fire with fire. But he will use only the fire of the Holy Spirit! His weapons will be spiritual not worldly. You cannot fight spiritual battles with worldly weapons.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (10:3-5).

Perhaps the best place to see how Paul understood this spiritual weaponry is in Ephesians 6:10-18.

*¹⁰ Finally, **be strong** in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then,*

*with the belt of **truth** buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of **righteousness** in place,¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the **gospel of peace**.¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of **faith**, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.¹⁷ Take the helmet of **salvation** and the sword of the Spirit, which is the **word of God**...*

Paul indicates that it is only when we are properly armed for battle that we are ready for the real conflict: **prayer**.

*...And **pray** in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

- 2) He reminds them of his **love**.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy... (11:2).

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine.¹¹ Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (11:7-11).

The "super-apostles" were motivated by **self-love**! Their ministry was a form of self-promotion and personal enrichment. Authentic ministry exalts love for others, not love for self. The best cure for the love of power is the **power of love**.

- 3) He reminds them of his **character**.

He did not minister among them because of any selfish ambition. He did not make any financial profit from his work in Corinth.

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?¹⁶ Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!¹⁷ Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you?¹⁸ I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did

he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course? (12:14-18).

Earlier in this letter, Paul had made a similar point when he said:

- *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the Word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity like men sent from God.” (II Cor. 2:17).*
- *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. (II Cor. 4:5).*

4) He reminds them of his **knowledge**.

But I don't consider myself inferior in any way to these “super apostles” who teach such things. ⁶ I may be unskilled as a speaker, but I'm not lacking in knowledge. We have made this clear to you in every possible way. (11:5-6).

Those who are interested in the “other gospel” will be enamored with preachers with great oratory and his ability to entertain and move the masses. The true Gospel is different. What matters is not the container, but the contents!

*⁷ But we have this treasure **in jars of clay** to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, **death** is at work in us, but **life** is at work in you. (II Cor. 4:7-10).*

5) He reminds them of his **credentials**.

The temptation in power struggles is to resort to one-upmanship. If you come at me with a rifle, I'll come at you with a bazooka. If you flaunt your college degree, I'll flaunt my post-graduate degree. If you have connections with people of influence, then I'll find connections with people of more influence. Paul refuses to play this game.

Rather than flaunting his worldly credentials (studied with Gamaliel, spiritual experiences, connections in Jerusalem, etc.), he sets forth the pedigree of a true apostle. However, he does so only because he feels his opponents have boxed him in a corner and he has no other choice.

¹⁶ I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. ¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast...

What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (11:16 – 30).

6) He reminds them of his **spiritual experiences**.

But these experiences are so holy, he prefers not to talk about them at all. However, because his opponents have boxed him into a corner and challenged his authority as an apostle, he feels he has no choice. But, he will speak of this only in third person.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. (12:1-6).

7) He reminds them of his thorn in the flesh.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:7-10).

No one knows for sure what the "thorn" was. Probably it was some physical ailment (perhaps bad eyesight). Regardless, Paul discovered that real power was manifest not in healing... but in manifesting the power of grace in his life through the weakness. Paul is not resigning himself to unchangeable fate, but joyfully embracing the will of God for his life.

TABLE TALK

1. Look again at the seven ways Paul defended himself from attack. What have you learned?
2. Have you ever been attacked and maligned? How did you respond?
3. Do you have a "thorn in the flesh"? Do you consider it a source of weakness... or of strength?