

## “Power and Control”

1 Kings 18:17-39; Matthew 9:2-8

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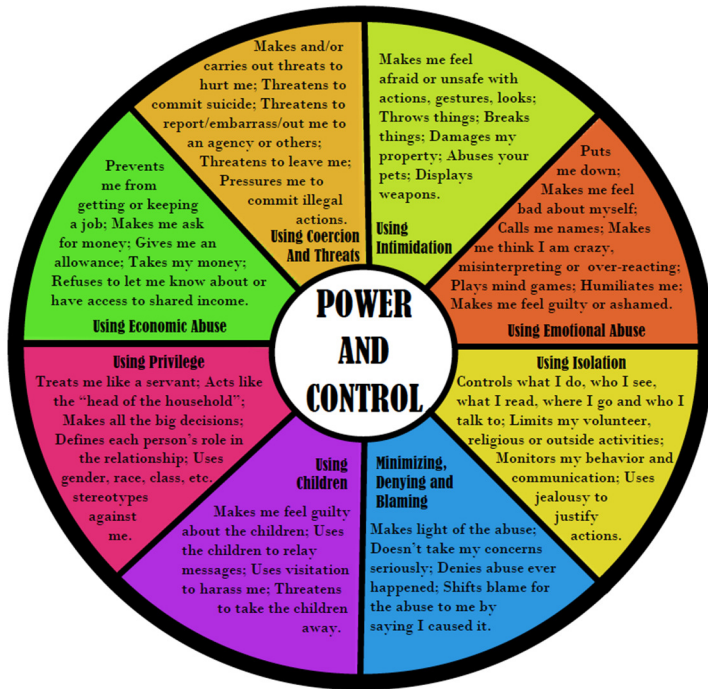
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Split, divorce, breach, division, crack, gap, rift, rupture, separation, tear, estrangement, break, detachment, parting, split-up, severance, contrast, pulling away; there are so many ways to describe how people divide. Today’s lesson details a story about Rehoboam and Jeroboam. They were both brethren of Israel. Rehoboam was the son of King Solomon. King Solomon was known as being one of the wisest kings that ever lived. God gave him this wisdom, but he did not always make wise decisions. The older Solomon got the farther away he became from God. King Solomon was notorious for being oppressive to his subjects. He required them to pay a large amount of taxes and he worked them very hard. He drove the people to finish the temple in Jerusalem, and he had them build up the city so it could be a world-renowned center. Many historic cities and landmarks have been built on slave labor, including our own White House. When Rehoboam took over the throne, the Israelites came to him and requested that he lighten their load. Rehoboam did not know what he should do. He is a young man so he asked some elders what they would recommend. The experienced men told him what any good manager knows: if you reduce the stress and strain on the people in your charge and if you show compassion, they will be loyal and work well with you. But Rehoboam does not accept this answer; he asks some of his young friends, what they think he should do. They remind him he is King now and he can do whatever he wants. They tell him if he wants to prove himself he needs to be harder than his father. Rehoboam follows the young men’s advice and belittles his dead father, literally. He threatens to lay more requirements on the people and says he will discipline them with “scorpions”. There were likely scorpions around in that time, but this was a figure of speech for a type of whip that had metal spikes in it, similar to what Jesus was flogged with before he was nailed to the cross.

Have you ever been threatened? Have you ever been beaten down physically or emotionally? Abuse runs rampant still in this day and age. People flex their muscles to cause fear and they have a quick tongue to discount and dominant another. Have you ever seen the power and control wheel?



This is a tool used to help abusers and victims understand the cycle of violence. Coercion, threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, denial, blame, using others to get to the victim, domination, and control of finances are all forms of domestic violence. October is Domestic Abuse awareness month. An international movement of wearing black on Thursdays in honor of those who have been abused and killed by domestic violence has recently resurged in popularity. More victims are speaking out against their abusers and advocacy and educational services are finally becoming more available.

The cycle of abuse can be hard to escape, not only because of the abuser's actions, but also because of the significant damage that is done to the victim's identity, self-esteem, and self-worth. This type of power often renders people incapable of seeing that there is another choice or way out. They often feel responsible and deserving of the abuse. I was in an abusive relationship. The abuse I received was emotional, in nature. It was subtle and cunning and made me feel like I was going crazy. I could never do anything right and everything was my fault. I felt responsible for my ex-husband's happiness and in the process of trying to please him, I lost myself. From the outside you would never know anything was wrong, except that I was pretty prickly and kept everyone at an arm's length. I took on the stress of the situation,

which made me ugly and unapproachable. I did not want anyone to know what was really going on and being a strong, independent, capable woman, I thought I could handle it. But wearing all the armor that I used to cover myself with was exhausting and trying to make everything look perfect on the outside was killing me on the inside. Alcoholism and complete dysfunction caused my ex-husband to hit rock bottom and he left, I am not sure that I would have ever escaped the cycle had that not happened. I was playing a role in the cycle too. Even though I hated it, I was loyal to my marital obligation. I thought if I could just change to be what he wanted everything would work out.

The fact of the matter is that the abuser often starts as the victim. They take control of the situation, exerting their power and pain upon others because they feel empty inside and cannot achieve happiness or satisfaction on their own. To keep themselves from dealing with their own emotions and past issues, they project their dislikes for themselves on to others. They treat others the way they secretly feel they deserve to be treated and in the process damage many lives.

Rehoboam decided to rule with an iron fist. He thought that would be how he would earn respect, but all he earned was fear and disloyalty. The country split at that time and Jeroboam was crowned King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Jeroboam was not the most faithful servant of the Lord either. He built two alters for people in the northern region to worship at, because he did not want them to make the traditional pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship God in Rehoboam's region. Jeroboam told the people this would be easier for them, but this was breaking the commandment of worshipping other gods and it was the start of the great dismantling of Israel.



I visited Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Italy this summer. In 1991, Croatia lawfully voted to disband themselves from the Republic of Yugoslavia and declared their independence. They had every right to do this and followed all the necessary steps. However, Serbia did not like this idea. Croatia is a rich country in resources and location. It is a travel destination and Croatia was providing a great deal of income for the collaborative

governmental system. So those with power started a rumor. The Serbian officials printed propaganda saying that the Croatians were going to enslave any Serb's in their country in concentration camps like they had done during World War II, under the direction of Adolf Hitler. Fear rose up and neighbors took up arms against one another and a civil war broke out. Many people lost their lives and the countries of this region were damaged forever not only physically, but emotionally.

The gospel text from Matthew tells a story of two self-serving disciples, James and John. Jesus had just revealed his forthcoming death for the third time and these two knuckleheads have the gall to ask if they can get the best seats in heaven with him when he goes. It is like your kids arguing about who is going to get what when you die, while you are still sitting there. Jesus tells them they have no idea what they are asking for. He asks them "are ready to drink the bitter cup of suffering, I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?"(Mark 10:38). They state they can handle it. Jesus tells them whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all.

What does this mean? This line is repeated again and again in the bible. The first will be last and the last first. It means just that. We have to be willing to lead in service of others. Those that oppress and abuse and corrupt to gain power and control are not the leaders that God is looking for. Those looking for greatness at the expense of others or by their own personal achievements will not be the ones with reserved seats in heaven. Greatness in God's eyes is the prodigal son. He was lost in a world of lust and evil. He wasted away all of his inheritance and ended up starving on the streets, but then he repented and went back to his father and begged his forgiveness. He was celebrated because the lost was found, the dead was brought back to life.



Martin Luther broke away from the Roman Catholic Church about 500 years ago. We celebrate this each year at this time. It is called the Reformation. This means there is an action of reforming that is or has occurred. When a victim escapes the abuse or reports what has happened to them, they are reforming. When war ends and new lines are drawn, a country is reforming. When a family splits apart due to divorce or unresolved conflict they are reforming. The lesson that these texts are trying to tell us is to be a true leader, one must follow. Self-promotion, self-justification, and domination will never get you to a place of peace or love. This path only leads to temporary and false control and ends in destruction and pain. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 says that you can have every ability, knowledge, power and good intention, but if you do not have love you have nothing. Proverbs 2: tells us to tune our ears to the world of Wisdom; set your heart on a life of understanding.” To get love we must be willing to give it selflessly. We must be willing to listen to good advice and serve others, rather than worrying about being served. Because of Christ’s death on the cross, we do not have to earn our greatness. We have the privilege of living a life of service with a servant’s heart. God is not saying we will not suffer in this world, but he is saying that his love and acceptance enables us to see what true love looks like and acts like.

So when given a choice, choose to love and serve others.