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***Weak Is the New Strong
Teachings On – Week 10***

Today we continue our message series on the teachings of Jesus. And if you have noticed anything so far, it may be that Jesus' way stands in contrast to the world's. Jesus' world is a topsy-turvy world, where what society values is turned upside down. Here are some examples of this from Jesus' teachings (both some we have covered and some upcoming!)

- The way first is last.
- The way of success is service.
- The way of attainment is relinquishment.
- The way of strength is weakness.
- The way of security is vulnerability.
- The way of protection is forgiveness (even to 7 x 70).
- The way of life is death – death to self, society, family.
- Know your strengths. Why? Because that's the only way that you can lay them down.
- God's power is made perfect...where? In our weakness.
- Want to get the most? Go to where the least is.
- Want to be free? Give complete control to God.
- Want to become great? Become least.
- Want to find yourself? Forget yourself.
- Want honor? Honor yourself with humility
- Want to 'get even' with your enemies? Bless, love and pray for them.

This is the way of Jesus. This is what we are learning about. Today we are going to look at the way of strength according to Jesus.

Let's pray...

Today, we are going to talk about power. What does real power look like? Is it the power of might? Is it a power over people? Is it a power to compel behavior? Is it a power to intimidate and punish?

Probably most all of us would say, *No, that isn't what real power looks like.* What does real power look like? Today, as we continue to study the teachings of Jesus, we look at his understanding of power. How he understands and exercises power has great implications for how we live our lives.

You don't think so? Well, power is present in all our relationships—our relationships with bosses and subordinates, with spouses and significant others, with various ages of people, and with our children. Power and how we use it, understand it, and share it has huge implications for how we live and live out our faith.

This is an easy one on which to make a mistake. And our mistaken understanding often begins with how we understand **God's power**. For although we won't often admit it, God's power can feel like anything but something of which we'd like to be on the receiving end.

We think of God as a **super cop**, watching every move we make, keeping a list of what a mess we make. And that list is then used as a ruler for what kind of punishment we deserve. God's power can feel punitive, angry, out of control, and arbitrary. One common manifestation of this is when someone who is in the midst of suffering asks, *Why is this happening to me? Why is God punishing me?* Have you ever said that or felt that way?

But what if God's power isn't anything at all like what we might normally think? What if God's power has **not one thing** to do with intimidation, control, or exerting force or punishment? What might God's power look like? And what would that mean for us, we who are created in the image and likeness of God?

Our first text is set at the end of Jesus' life. Found in the twenty-second chapter of Luke, it shows Jesus after he has had his last meal with his disciples and has gone to the garden of Gethsemane to prayer. He is talking with his disciples; here is the text (Luke 22:47-54). As the text is read, listen for how various people use their power to affect the situation.

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!" Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house.

There are many people showing their strength in this text. Judas shows his with a kiss of betrayal. The temple police and elders show their strength by arresting Jesus. The disciples want to show their strength with a sword.

Peter—who is not named in this text, but is in the parallel version of this story in John's Gospel (John 18:1-12)—is the one who draws his sword and cuts off the ear of a slave. Certainly he shows strength.

Does Jesus exercise power in this text? Yes, he exercises the power to heal as well as the power to continue to be who he always is—he doesn't let circumstances change who he is. And while Jesus may appear weak and Peter strong, we know it is actually the other way around.

As I look at this text, I think about what Jesus thought of Peter in this moment. Poor Peter doesn't get it. As of this point in this story, he doesn't get that, while he looks strong, there with his sword, striking out violently at those who seek to hurt Jesus, he is actually showing his weakness.

Jesus is frustrated with Peter. He says, "No more of this!" and touches and heals the ear of the slave. In another version of the text he says, *those who live by the sword will die by the sword.* (Matthew 26:52) We almost feel Jesus' frustration. After all,

hasn't Peter been around since the start of Jesus' ministry? Doesn't he know what Jesus is all about?

Anger, shoving, loud voices...how do we get the idea that this is what power looks like? I guess we learn it as children. The bigger kids learn they can use their size to get what they want—to intimidate the smaller kids—and sometimes, for a variety of reasons, they do.

As adults, we aren't much better. Parents can belittle their children and easily get away with it. Ministers can abuse those in their care and use religious language as a way to hide. Companies can take advantage of workers because they hold the purse strings. All kinds of folk from all walks of life know almost intuitively who has more power in the relationship, and in our brokenness, we misuse the power that has been entrusted to us.

Let me flesh this out a bit more and then give you one of Jesus' best teachings about this upside-down understanding of power.

OK, so Jesus wants us to see that his understanding of power isn't the same as the world's. For while the world may think that the wealthy, the rich, the healthy, and the educated are favored by God, Jesus says it doesn't work like that.

No teaching puts it better (although I will admit there is much confusion for many of us with this text) than the Beatitudes (or "the Blessings"). This is a short film of this scripture, found in Matthew 5. Notice the words and the images in this video and ask yourself, *Are these really the blessed?*

Video: Blessed (3.5 minutes)

Jesus is not saying, *here is a list of what one must be to be blessed*, nor is the blessing announced caused by the condition specified. (In other words you don't have to be poor in spirit to know God's kingdom.) Anyone who knows poverty, mourning or persecution wouldn't consider that state blessed.

Rather, what I hear is Jesus saying is that our human focus on the external, the human value system of who is the big dog and who is the little dog, doesn't matter to God. In fact, those we often point to as the most broken and in need are claimed by God. Their poverty isn't part of God's punishment; rather, these externals do not have the final say on who we are or who is valuable to God. Rob Bell puts it this way: "weak is the new strong."

Jesus, as the one who is our window into the nature of the Divine, shows us this very different understanding of power. You may be familiar with Jesus' words:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

Wow! What does that mean?

It means a couple of things...“An eye for an eye” is the embodiment of *lex talionis*, the law of proportionality. What that means is you cannot claim more than the value of what was damaged. If your property worth \$50 was stolen, you cannot claim \$100. One translation of the Scriptures translates 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' as 'an eye for the value of an eye, a tooth for the value of a tooth.' (Martin Buber)

This was actually a big deal. An eye for an eye was progress—it was *You break my arm, I kill your kids*. An eye for an eye was progress. But Jesus pushes it further. It is like he is saying, what we may think of as weak—not getting revenge, not retaliating—is actually strength,

And doesn't it take more strength not to retaliate? Don't you have to be stronger not to obsess about those who harm you (this may be a better translation than *Do not resist one who is evil*)? Doesn't it take more from you to turn the other cheek, to say, *You cannot really hurt the core of who I am no matter what*?

This is about going outside the box. The way things usually are is that the strong control it all and the weak are victims. Jesus seeks to put the power, not only of choice, but of character, back in the control of the people who are often the victims in this world.

And remember, there is historical context in these texts. When Jesus says, “and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles,” he is referring to the Roman Law that a soldier with a load could demand that a Jew he came in contact with should carry the load *one mile*; he had to do this or he broke the law. Jesus' teachings take the power of the Roman soldiers and turn it upside-down. Can you imagine the soldier's surprise when you went the extra mile? His anxiety was that he was going to get in trouble as the law specified **one** mile. Jesus is introducing a vastly different understanding of power and who really has it.

Here's another text. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, talks about his pedigree, his importance, his power. But then he says,

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me... Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor.12:7b-10)

*Whenever I am weak, then I am strong...*here is the thing.

Some of us—the survivors, the determined, the stubborn—sometimes don't find God very easily because we misunderstand this issue with power. And so, we are very filled up with our own understanding and wisdom; there is no real way to see it differently.

We are like this cup—it is already filled, and so when we try to add God in, it just rushes right out. How can God be who God is when the job is already filled by us?

So often we don't want to look at our weakness. It is uncomfortable. Instead, we believe that we must be strong, we must have all the answers, and we find ourselves yelling and screaming—or at least loudly giving our opinion and not feeling very comfortable with our own or anyone's weakness.

Recently I was in the store. I think it was a Rite-Aid. In front of me was a very demanding customer. The more she got angry at the cashier, the more mistakes she made. The customer was trying to exert her power, but she looked like a bully.

And what about that story about the car that was stuck in traffic when the guy in the car behind was laying on the horn. Finally, the driver got out of the car and walked behind him. As the second driver put the window down, the man with the stuck car said, "how about this...you go up and try to start my car, and I will sit back here and honk."

What would it be like if, the next time someone said something negative to you, you didn't strike back with your own zinger, but instead just listened? What would it be like if you confessed your mistakes and took the consequences, instead of denying what happened?

This is a story that calls us all to ponder, *What is weakness and what is strength?* This video is called: **Team Hoyt. (4 minutes)**

These days, I am getting more comfortable with my own weakness. I don't know it all, I cannot do it all, I make mistakes, and I constantly mess up, yet in my weakness I find God's strength. Before, when I was so concerned with looking good, I relied only on myself because I thought that is what it was about. But it isn't. Now I see it. In my weakness I find God's strength, and that makes **all** the difference.