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Power, Corruption, and a Better America
November 3, 2016

Well, this has been quite an election cycle, hasn't it? At least in my tenure, it seems that with each cycle the voices get louder, the speeches get nastier, and the accusations become more demeaning. One word that is often thrown around this time around is corruption. Throughout the primaries and right up to the present, the candidates have been accusing each other of being corrupt—of using their position of power in corrupt ways to gain even more power or more perks. But certainly power and corruption are not limited just to political figures.

Enron is perhaps the biggest scandal that has hit Houston. It was corruption at the highest level as people like Ken Lay and Jeff Skilling and Andrew Fastow skirted the rules. It would be nice to think that this was an isolated case, but skirting the rules is something that becomes more common the more powerful we become regardless of the context. In one study of 27,000 working adults in twenty-seven different countries, participants were asked how often it's okay to: (1) claim government benefits to which you are not entitled; (2) avoid paying a fare on public transportation; (3) cheat on taxes; and (4) accept a bribe. Their responses were then correlated with their wealth, or shall we say economic power. Sadly, wealthier participants were more likely to say it's okay to act in the ways described.¹

Perhaps the biggest personal scandal in sport in the last decade is the fall of Tiger Woods. The world's greatest golfer, wealthy like no other athlete before him, and a beautiful model wife. And yet Woods was found hooking up with women at seemingly every port. But while Woods' behavior is perhaps a bit more extensive than others, a Dutch study of 1,275 participants suggests that the higher the social status a person, the more likely he or she is to have had an extramarital affair.²

In 2012 a group of researchers from the University of California published a set of studies that correlated social status and wealth to behavior. In one of these studies, researchers set up a pedestrian at a well-marked crosswalk. Approaching cars were coded based on their value. New luxury cars were given a 5, while old Dodge Pacers were given a 1. A couple year old Civic was given a 3. When the results were

tallied, those with higher end vehicles were far less likely to stop for the pedestrian even though not stopping was a violation of California law.³

Another of their studies involved a computer game in which participants were shown five rolls of a die. The participants were told to add up the score of the five rolls and those with the highest score would win a cash prize. Because the rolls of the die were rigged by the computer, it was impossible to get an actual score in excess of 12. However, when the study was completed a good number of participants cheated and reported a score more than 12. Which participants were most likely to cheat? It was those who reported a higher social class.⁴ Now, please understand that I don't share these stories because I have anything against those with power, money, or clout. On the bigger scale of things, I am one of those persons with such advantages. I share these studies with you so that you see that power does something to us.

Now lest you think that this tendency of power to corrupt is just for others and not for you, consider "the cookie monster" study. It brought together groups of three undergraduates. Through a random process, one in each group of three was donned the supervisor and was given the task of leading the trio in re-writing an aspect of university policy. After 30 minutes, a plate of five cookies was brought to each group. It was assumed that virtually no one would take the last cookie, due to the law of politeness. The question was who would take the fourth cookie after each in the group already had one. Interestingly, the one who just 30 minutes earlier was donned the supervisor of the group was nearly twice as likely to be the one to take the fourth cookie. And beyond that the supervisors were also more likely to eat with their mouths open, smack their lips, and spill crumbs.⁵ What just 30 minutes of power can do!

Perhaps the place we are most vulnerable to corruption when afforded power is in the area of speech. We simply become less polite and less diplomatic the more power we have. If we are in a lower position than the one with whom we are speaking or if we perceive ourselves to be in an environment of equals, we communicate with persuasion and tact, but when we are in the position of power, we tend to cut people off and even become rude. Rather than listening and finding a meeting of minds, we expect people to jump on board for no other reason than that we have told them to do so. According to a University of North

Carolina Business school study of 1,700 workers, 55% of employees had been treated rudely on the job and the manager or boss was three times more likely than a co-worker to be the one who instigated the rudeness. It's easy to justify ourselves when we are in positions of power, but when we consider what research says on how incivility in the workplace decreases performance and increases attrition, our justification is rather hollow.⁶

What should all this tell us? It should tell us that if we have within us a desire to be what we might call "good people" we must be very careful as we gain more power through wealth or position. The kindness and teamwork and giving nature we had when we are at the bottom of the ladder may no longer be there once we get to the top. When we stand at the bottom and look up, we may find it unthinkable to behave like those we see above us, and yet once we get there, we may find ourselves pulled to act in the same way as those who were once over us. In his book *The Power Paradox*, Dacher Keltner concludes the very same:

The very practices that enable us to rise in power vanish in our experience of power. We gain and maintain power through empathy, but in our experience of power we lose our focus on others. We gain and maintain power through giving, but when we are feeling powerful, we act in self-gratifying and often greedy ways. Dignifying others with expressions of gratitude is essential to achieving enduring power, but once we are feeling powerful, we become rude and offensive. We build enduring power by telling stories that unite, but once we feel powerful, we tell stories that divide and demean. It isn't just dictators, power-mad politicians, kings of high finance, and drug-addled rock stars who are vulnerable to abuses of power.⁷

It isn't just them. It's you and me who are just as vulnerable.

I think I am right in saying that never before have there been two presidential candidates who have been seen so unfavorably. Both have majority unfavorability ratings. I think the reason, or at least a major reason, is because of the way these two have used their positions of power in the past. But truth be told, if we had their power, we might fall into some of the very same traps.

So here is my plea. It's a plea for you and me. Although it appears Clinton or Trump will be our president, resolve in your positions of power not to walk in their way, even if one day you run for president. Jesus said, "In this world the kings and great men lord it over their people...but among you it will be different...the leader should be like a servant."⁸ In the context of this talk that means let the pedestrian cross the street. Leave the cookie for someone else. Stay faithful to your spouse. And speak kindly to others no matter how high you climb the ladder. That's what will make America better for all of us.

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¹ Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence* (2016), 126.

² Joris Lammers et al, "[Power Increases Infidelity Among Men and Women](#)," *Psychological Science* (July, 19, 2011), 1–7.

³ Paul K. Piff et al, "[Higher Social Class Predicts Increased Unethical Behavior](#)," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* (March 13, 2012), 4087.

⁴ Piff et al, 4088.

⁵ Keltner, 117-118.

⁶ Peter Post, "[Rudeness Is on Rise in Workplace, and It Can Be Costly](#)," *Boston Globe* (June 26, 2015).

⁷ Keltner, 100.

⁸ Luke 22:25-26