

# Stop 'Lording It Over' Me!

## The Distinction Between 'Authority' and 'Authoritarian'

Mark 10:35-45 Nehemiah 5:14-15  
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Being in a position of authority, and being authoritarian are two completely different things. Knowing the difference is crucial, whether the issue involves your leadership role in business, a volunteer organization, or the church. It also impacts one's understanding of and approach to parenting.

Back when I attended seminary, we spent a good deal of time on this topic, because we were informed it would greatly impact our ministry as a pastor of a congregation. As pastors-in-training, we were warned to beware the temptation of power and control, as defined as an authoritarian relationship with the congregation. Yet on the flip side of that, we were also cautioned to not shy away from the **inherent authority that comes with the position and responsibilities of a pastor and preacher**. Many of us were a bit confused, because we weren't really clear on the actual distinction between having authority and being authoritarian. After all, many of us were part of the anti-authority generation in the 1960s and 70s. But as it turns out, **if persons who are in positions of authority do not exercise that responsibility as a leader, then they will become ineffective at best, to potentially destructive**.

Let me explain by applying this to the task of **parenting**. The position, role and responsibilities of being a parent comes with an inherent authority, which if *not* exercised may likely lead to later problems with that child. Family counselors rightly suggest that the key, however, is to not become authoritarian, as in transforming a parent's rightly-given authority into a weapon of power and control to the point of some kind of totalitarian domination over their child.

In addition to parents, pastors and church leaders, this dynamic can and should be applied to anyone in a position of authority, including educators, those in the business world, and of course politicians. This difference between authority and authoritarian is wonderfully explained in the book, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*. The author, feminist theologian **Carter Heyward**, professor of Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, writes:

**Authority, the 'power to authorize' or the 'ability to empower,' can be held and bestowed in just and unjust ways. Authority is a morally neutral concept, neither good nor evil in itself... By contrast, 'authoritarianism,' the hoarding of authority as power over others, is always spiritually problematic.**

**The biblical term used for this hierarchical, authoritarian style of leadership,** which we heard about in both scripture passages this morning, **is "lording it over" others.** The Old Testament reading from the book of Nehemiah reveals that as a governor, he

refused to "lord it over" the people like the previous governors did. For they laid heavy burdens upon the people and took from them food and wine and money. We're told that even the servants of these governors "lorded it over" the people.

Examples of this kind of governing can be found in many countries today wherever people are led by authoritarian dictators or heavy-handed politicians. And yes, I will take the risk of veering into politics enough to say that **I think some politicians in our country and our state tend to confuse the inherent authority of their elected positions with being authoritarian, wanting to hoard authority as power in order to "lord it over" others.**

Sadly, there is no better example of authoritarian abuse in religious circles than when it used by those who think they possess the power and control to dictate and demand that others think, behave, believe, and interpret the scriptures the same way they do. So yes, accusations of lording it over others can indeed be leveled at certain religious organizations, their leaders and their practices. As an example, **is not the continued refusal to ordain women into church leadership roles within certain faith traditions, along with the desire to control decisions concerning women's health issues, including birth control, nothing less than age-old attempts to lord it over women?**

Those of us on the progressive end of the theological spectrum, devoted to issues of social justice and equality, often find ourselves feeling called to speak truth to power to others in positions of authority within our denominations. While some argue they are simply adhering to church tradition and maintaining church heritage, our common refrain is, **'enough is enough,' when faced with what we have considered to be authoritarian agendas of power and control over others.**

In today's gospel reading from Mark 10, Jesus makes a reference to "lording it over" others in relation to how the Gentiles govern their people. Jesus immediately follows this statement by commanding the disciples, "But it shall not be so among you." For it seems that brothers James and John had issues of power and control of their own. They had the chutzpah to ask Jesus to grant them anything they asked. But like a wise parent responding to a child, Jesus, before saying yes, first asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" The response: Oh, nothing less than to let us sit at your right and left hand in your glory. **It's nothing new to want to move up the ladder and scale of importance and influence.**

**Henri Nouwen**, who was a Catholic priest, a Harvard professor at one point in his ministry, and as I always mention, one of my favorite authors on spirituality, comments that people have always been tempted to replace love of others with power over others. He writes,

**The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led.**

Many good religious folks, including many pastors, seem to have forgotten the core of Jesus' ministry: to serve, not to be served. Instead, some get trapped in the temptation of upward mobility, seeking bigger churches, more prestige in the community, and being seated in places of honor. Jesus' declaration that he came not to be served but to serve reflects something almost antithetical in our culture – **a downward mobility.** Nouwen writes, "The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which the world has invested so much, but the way of downward

mobility ending on the cross..." As we continue to learn, authentic discipleship, following the ways and teachings of Jesus, is costly.

The following is a quote that I've shared with you before concerning the issue of authority and leadership. It's from **Dee Hock**, the founder and former CEO of VISA:

Control is not leadership; management is not leadership; leadership is leadership. If you seek to lead, invest at least 50 percent of your time leading yourself - your own purpose, ethics, principles, motivations, conduct. Invest at least 20 percent leading those with authority over you and 15 percent leading your peers. **If you don't understand that you work for your mislabeled subordinates, then you know nothing of leadership. You know only tyranny.**

What is true in business is often true in the church. I think that the biblical texts today have been appropriate for us to reflect upon before we elect, at the close of this service, a new class of **Ruling Elders** to our church Session. For they are being **called to lead and serve this congregation – a calling that includes and involves inherent authority, but not being authoritarian.**

I'd like to challenge you to reflect this week upon your own leadership style and the inherent authority you have in your life: in your home, at work, in the various organizations in which you are involved (including the church), and in your relationships with others. Crossing that line from exercising authority to being authoritarian is sometimes a fine line. Being aware of that is a spiritual discipline I personally find important as I reflect upon my own leadership as a pastor.

So it is my prayer that God will show us ways to become more effective leaders – to focus on serving rather than on being served. In doing so, remember Carter Heyward's definition of authority as the "ability to empower" others. May God help us to become servant leaders.

Amen.