

WORDS FROM BIGTOP

SEPTEMBER 23RD, 2026

from Curt “BigTop” Marek

POWER PLAY

Who's Really in Control When the Glare Comes Out

“But let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

JAMES 1:19–20 (ASV)

If you’ve ever had kids, you’ll understand the title of this devotional. Power Play! I’ve raised seven of my own — six adopted and one biological — and now I’m helping my fiancée with her two boys, one a teen and one a preteen. I’ve also worked in schools for over 30 years. Thank God I was on the operations side of things, because I’m pretty sure I could never have been a teacher.

This morning I was making breakfast, and my preteen — who loves to just give you that blank stare — is standing there looking at me. I’ve just served him pancakes and sausage links. On a weekday. And the first thing out of his mouth is, “Am I getting eggs too?”

Of course I explain, “No. You have protein in the sausage.” All I get back is that glare of a stare. Then not a word — until he tries to push me out of the way at the sink, where I’m washing the pans from cooking breakfast for him and his brother, holding a half-eaten pancake. So I say, “What’s up?” He says, “I’m full.” So I say, “So you didn’t need the eggs?” Then the glare of a stare. He drops the plate in the sink for me to wash, and he’s off to his phone to play a game.

Then we get in the car, and this is the one that drives me crazy. He opens the passenger door and creeps his way into the front seat slower than molasses. He looks over at me with that glare, the door still standing wide open — and I blew a gasket. “Beep-a-da-beep-a-da-beep!” We won’t say all I said, but it was a quiet ride to school from there.

What is it with the power play? Kids will do whatever they can to take control of a situation. The menu. The sink. The speed of a car door. And if I’m honest, that car ride had two people making a power play — and only one of them was a preteen.

So let’s look at what Scripture says about power plays — the ones our kids make, the ones we make, and the one Jesus made that changes everything.

Manna and Melons: Israel's Power Play

God was feeding Israel breakfast from heaven. Every single morning, manna on the ground — free, fresh, and delivered. And what did they say? Basically, “Am I getting eggs too?”

“We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt for nought; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic: but now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all save this manna to look upon.”

NUMBERS 11:5–6 (ASV)

Did you catch that? They remembered slavery as a buffet. The complaint was never really about the food. It was about control — who gets to decide what’s on the plate. That’s what a power play is. It’s not about the eggs. It’s about who’s in charge.

And here’s the part that made me laugh this morning. God gave them the meat they demanded — “a whole month, until it come out at your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you” (Numbers 11:20, ASV). They got exactly what they asked for, and it didn’t satisfy. Kind of like a half-eaten pancake and a boy who was “full” all along. They won the argument and lost the blessing. That’s the thing about a power play — even when you win it, you lose.

Before we’re too hard on the kids, though, let’s be honest. How many times have we stood in front of God’s provision and asked, “Is that all?” Sometimes the preteen at the counter is us.

The Warning: Absalom at the Gate

Now, I’m not saying a kid who wants eggs is plotting a coup. But Scripture does give us a warning about what a power play can grow into when nobody deals with it.

David’s son Absalom started small. He got up early and stood by the gate, catching people on their way to see the king. He’d listen to their complaints and tell them, in so many words, “If I were in charge, you’d get justice.” He shook their hands and kissed them. Sounds like a politician!

“And on this manner did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment: so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.”

2 SAMUEL 15:6 (ASV)

It started at the gate, and it ended in a full-blown rebellion against his own father. But here’s the part that gets me as a dad. Before any of that happened, Absalom lived in Jerusalem “two full

years... and he saw not the king's face" (2 Samuel 14:28, ASV). Two years in the same city, and David wouldn't see his own son. The warning cuts both ways. Unchecked power plays grow. But so does the distance when a father stops showing up. The glare at the breakfast counter isn't something to ignore — and it isn't something to walk away from either.

Both Sides of the Table

Now, before any kid reading this thinks Dad just admitted he lost — hold on. The wrong in that kitchen and that car went both ways. And Paul wrote to both sides of the breakfast table. He actually talked to the kids first.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother (which is the first commandment with promise), that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

EPHESIANS 6:1–3 (ASV)

Honor is bigger than obedience. You can technically do what you're told and still dishonor someone the whole time. “Am I getting eggs too?” to the person who just cooked for you — that's not a preference. That's ungrateful. The glare of a stare instead of an answer — that's not quiet. That's disrespect. Pushing past the person who made your breakfast so you can drop your plate in the sink for him to wash — that's dishonor. Creeping into the car with the door hanging open while everyone waits on you isn't being slow. It's a statement. And every one of those is a power play.

Here's what I want every kid to hear, including mine: honor isn't about who's winning. It's about who God put in your life to take care of you. And God attached a promise to it — “that it may be well with thee.” Honor isn't God taking something away from you. It's God setting you up for a good life. The glare might feel like power, but it never gets you what you actually want. Just ask Israel. Just ask Absalom.

So both of us were wrong that morning. His part was disrespect. My part was anger. God speaks to both of us in the same passage — and He expects both of us to change.

My Power Play: The Grown-Up in the Car

Which brings me back to that car ride. Because when I blew a gasket, that was a power play too. Mine just came with more volume.

Then, in the very next breath, Paul turns to the dads: “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, ASV). Notice he doesn’t say “don’t correct them.” He says don’t provoke them. There’s a difference between correcting a kid and trying to win a standoff with one.

So what’s the difference? I’ve been chewing on that all day, and here’s where I’ve landed. Correcting a kid is about their heart. Provoking a kid is about my pride. Correction asks, “What does he need to learn?” Provoking asks, “How do I win this?” If I’m honest, “So you didn’t need the eggs?” wasn’t correction. It was a jab. It felt good for about two seconds, and all it did was hand him another reason to glare.

Correction speaks to the behavior, not the person. “Buddy, close the door, please — the AC is getting out” corrects. Sarcasm, name-calling, and “What is wrong with you?” provoke. Correction is calm and short. Say it once, clearly, and expect it to happen. Provoking gets louder with every round, because it’s trying to overpower instead of instruct. Correction picks its timing. Some conversations shouldn’t happen in the driveway at 7:45 with the door wide open. They should happen that evening, when everybody’s calmer, and away from his brother. Provoking happens in the heat of the moment, in front of an audience, because the goal is to be right right now.

Correction is consistent. The same expectations on Monday as on Friday, whether I slept well or not. Provoking makes up the rules in anger, so the kid never knows which dad is getting in the car. And correction keeps the relationship bigger than the rule. That word “nurture” Paul uses is about raising and training — it’s something you do with a kid, not to a kid. Sometimes the best correction starts with me going first: “Hey, I shouldn’t have yelled this morning. That’s on me. But we need to talk about the door.” Notice what that apology does and doesn’t do. It owns my tone. It doesn’t drop the standard. The door still gets closed. Respect is still expected. When a dad owns his part, a kid learns what repentance looks like — and it’s a lot harder to keep a power play going against someone who isn’t playing.

James put it even plainer: be “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:19–20, ASV). My wrath got the door closed. It got a quiet car. But it didn’t produce one ounce of righteousness in that front seat — in him or in me. Nobody learned anything on that ride to school, except maybe that BigTop has a volume knob.

The Cost: Moses and the Rock

If anyone ever had the right to blow a gasket, it was Moses. Forty years of complaining. Forty years of “Why did you bring us out here?” And in Numbers 20, the people were thirsty and fighting again. God gave Moses clear instructions: speak to the rock, and it will give water.

But Moses was done. He gathered them up and said, “Hear now, ye rebels; shall we bring you forth water out of this rock?” (Numbers 20:10, ASV). Listen to that — “shall we.” In that moment it wasn’t about God anymore. It was about Moses, and Moses being right, and Moses being fed up.

“And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice: and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle.”

NUMBERS 20:11 (ASV)

Here’s the hard part. The water still came. The people still got what they needed — just like my boys still got to school. From the outside, it worked. But God said to Moses, “Because ye believed not in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land” (Numbers 20:12, ASV). The blowup cost Moses the promised land.

Our power plays as parents usually “work.” The door gets closed. The kid gets in line. But they cost us something — the chance to show our kids who God is. Moses shows us the price of winning the standoff.

The Answer: Jesus and the Towel

So what does real power look like? John 13 shows us, and it happens right after a meal.

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all the things into his hands, and that he came forth from God, and goeth unto God, riseth from supper, and layeth aside his garments; and he took a towel, and girded himself.”

JOHN 13:3–4 (ASV)

Read that again. Jesus knew He had all things in His hands. He had nothing to prove, no standoff to win, no control to grab. And because He was that secure, He picked up a towel and washed feet — including the feet of the guy who was about to betray Him.

And don't miss this: Peter tried his own power play right in the middle of it. "Thou shalt never wash my feet" (John 13:8, ASV). Jesus didn't yell. He didn't glare back. He just kept serving and kept teaching.

Years ago, when I was pastoring Spicewood Family Church in Spicewood, Texas, we started a pastoral training class. Eleven people were training to become licensed pastors. For sixteen months we worked through book after book — the Bible most of all — and there were plenty of tests along the way. But none of them meant more to me, or to that class, than the last one.

The final test was on a Saturday night, after a meal we had all prepared together. When the meal was over, I came out of the kitchen with a towel over my shoulder and a basin in my hands, and I washed each of my students' feet. My mom and dad were in that class. So were two of my best friends, and my wife at the time. I was the teacher, and I was also the youngest person in the room. So as I came around that table, there was a different kind of humbling for each person. I knelt, washed their feet, and prayed over the ministry God had laid on their heart.

I had all the authority in that room. I could pass or fail every one of them. I could have handed them one more written test to see how much they'd learned. But that's not what that night was about. It was about serving people who clearly had a heart to serve others. They had given up sixteen months of Saturdays with family, friends, and loved ones to pursue an opportunity to serve, and I needed them to know I saw it — by serving them one last time.

That night came rushing back to me this morning, and it convicted me. Because I was already standing at the sink. I already had the dish towel in my hand. I was literally doing what Jesus did — serving the ones who weren't grateful. I just had the wrong heart about it by the time we hit the car. Real power doesn't need to win the standoff. Real power knows who it belongs to, and it serves anyway.

But don't mistake the towel for giving in. When Jesus finished, He sat back down and said, "Ye call me, Teacher, and, Lord: and ye say well; for so I am" (John 13:13, ASV). He never stopped being the Teacher. He never handed over His authority. He used it to serve, and then He set the expectation: "For I have given you an example, that ye also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15, ASV). The towel wasn't Jesus losing the room. It was Jesus showing them who they were supposed to become. That's what I want for my boys. When I'm standing at that sink, I'm not losing. I'm showing them what they'll do for somebody else one day.

Who's Really in Control?

Kids are going to make power plays. So are we. The question isn't whether the glare of a stare is coming — it is. The question is whether we answer it like Moses at the rock or like Jesus with the towel. Kids, the glare isn't power, and honor isn't losing. Dads, the gasket isn't power either, and serving isn't losing.

I don't have this all figured out. I blew it with my tone this morning, and I'll own that. But owning my tone isn't the same as giving up the standard. Nobody really wins a power play — not the kid who makes it, and not the dad who answers it with a gasket. I'm learning that the most powerful thing a dad can do isn't to win. It's to stay swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath — and keep picking up the towel. Tomorrow there'll be another breakfast and another car ride. There still won't be eggs on pancake day, and that door is still going to get closed. But there will be a dad who's a little slower to wrath.

A PRAYER FOR BOTH SIDES OF THE TABLE

Lord, You know every breakfast standoff, every glare, every slow-motion car door, and every time we've lost our temper over it. Forgive us for the times we've tried to win instead of teach. Forgive us for the times we've looked at Your daily provision and asked, "Is that all?" Teach our kids to honor, not just obey — to say thank you for the pancakes and close the door without being told. Guard our kids' hearts from the small power plays that grow into big rebellions, and guard our hearts from the distance and the anger that push them there. Make us swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath. When we're standing at the rock, fed up and ready to swing, remind us that the water was always Yours to give. And teach us to be like Jesus — secure enough in who we belong to that we can pick up the towel and serve, even when nobody says thank you. Amen.

Sit With It

1. What's the "Am I getting eggs too?" in your life right now — the place where God has provided and you're still asking for more?
2. Think about the last power play in your house. Was it really about the thing on the surface, or was it about who was in control?
3. Where might a small power play be quietly growing in your family — and where might distance be growing along with it?
4. When was the last time your "wrath" got results but didn't produce righteousness? What did it cost?
5. Moses said "shall we bring you water." Where have you made a moment about yourself that should have been about God?
6. Who in your home needs you to pick up the towel this week? What would serving them look like in a practical way?
7. Is there someone — maybe a kid — you need to apologize to? What's stopping you?
8. If you're a kid reading this: where have you been technically obeying but not honoring? What would honor look like at breakfast tomorrow?

— **BigTop**

Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version (1901), which is in the public domain.