

**Power: A Bible Study of Mark 9:33-35**  
**The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program**  
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**“About This Resource”**

Power. The word calls to mind so many images. Our English word for power comes from the Latin *Posse*, meaning, “to be able.” But, able to do what? And how? Questions surrounding power pose constant struggles for humankind. How is it obtained? Who should wield it? To what ends? Great works of literature explore power as a concept. Politicians court it as a necessity. Science studies it as a force. Each Sunday we end the Lord’s Prayer by ascribing power to God. In this resource, we will consider issues of power from the individual to the international level and explore the connections in between.

The study begins by looking at scripture. We frame our exploration by looking at Jesus’ understanding of power. How did Jesus view power? How do we begin to understand power in light of our faith?

Next, participants are invited to take part in a skit in order to explore the dynamics of power in community. What role does power play in the health of communities? What makes for a strong community?

Finally, participants are invited to look at the ways in which power is exercised by nations in the world today. What are the relationships between power and justice? What are the relationships between power and peace?

The skit in this study is called *Oikoumene*. Two versions of it are provided. The version in **Appendix A** provides the opportunity to involve all the participants in the study. It calls for a cast that includes the speaking roles of Narrator, Children, Grandmother, and Most Powerful Man. It further provides for non-speaking parts: Mother, Father, and Townspeople. These characters engage in pantomime as the other character speaks. **Appendix B** provides a version of the skit that includes the speaking roles of Narrator, Children, and Grandmother. You may use either version depending on the

size and interests of your group. DECIDE IN ADVANCE WHICH VERSION OF THE SKIT YOU WILL USE AND MAKE ENOUGH COPIES FOR THOSE WHO WILL TAKE PART IN IT.

This study may be used by youth, young adults, and adults as part of a congregation's Christian education program. It may be used by a committee of the congregation, Presbyterian Women's or Presbyterian Men's group, or other small group. It may be used on a Sunday morning, at a weeknight dinner, at a youth group meeting, or as part of a retreat.

The study is designed for one hour, however it may exceed that time frame. You may be able to complete the study in an hour. You may choose to schedule a slightly longer time period. You may choose to expand the study to two weeks.

## **Goals of This Study**

- ❑ To explore power as a theological concept
- ❑ To explore power as an organizing force in communities
- ❑ To explore power as a tool of nation-states

## **Agenda**

- ❑ Introductions and Opening Prayer (3 minutes)
- ❑ Bible Study (5 minutes)
- ❑ *Oikoumene*– a skit (25 minutes)
- ❑ Bible Study (5 minutes)
- ❑ Understandings of Power and Nation-States (15 minutes)
- ❑ Bible Study (5 minutes)
- ❑ Closing Prayer (2 minutes)

## **Materials Needed**

- ❑ Bible
- ❑ Flip chart with newsprint
- ❑ Markers
- ❑ Masking tape
- ❑ Copies of the skit *Oikoumene* for those who will be performing (see “About This Resource”)
- ❑ Copies of the handout “Understanding the Roles and Powers of Nation-States” for all participants

□ **Introductions and Opening Prayer** (3 minutes)

- Welcome the participants. If necessary, invite participants to introduce themselves.
- Open with prayer.
- Introduce the study.

*Power. Some people have a lot of it. Others know it only from afar. It can make life easy and it can complicate matters to no end. In many ways power is a paradox. Our prayers are invariably filled with pleas and requests about it. We claim all power comes from God. Yet what does it mean to say this in a world where power and goodness do not always join hands?*

*In this study, we will look at some issues surrounding power through a lens of faith, explore how individuals, communities, and nations understand power, and seek to discern how these understandings both compliment and conflict with one another.*

□ **Bible Study** (5 minutes)

- Tell participants that you will read Mark 9:33-35. Invite participants to consider the question, “What do you learn about Jesus’ understanding of power from this story?” as they listen to the reading.
- Read Mark 9:33-35.
- Invite participants to find a partner and to share briefly their answers to the question, “What do you learn about Jesus’ understanding of power from this story?” Allow two minutes for this sharing.
- In the full group, invite partners to share two key words or images about Jesus and power. Quickly newsprint their responses.

□ ***Oikoumene*– a skit** (25 minutes)

- Distribute copies of the skit, *Oikoumene*, to participants. It is found in either Appendix A or Appendix B. See “About This Resource” for more information.
- Perform the skit.
- Discuss the skit. Questions for discussion are:
  - Do you identify with any of the characters in this story? If so, who and why?
  - What makes you feel powerful?
  - Do you know anyone who behaves like the Most Powerful Man?
  - As you look at the world around you are there any situations you have experienced in your life that this skit calls to your mind?

□ **Bible Study** (5 minutes)

- Tell participants that you will read Mark 9:33-35. Invite participants to consider the question, “How does the understanding of power held by the Most Powerful Man in the skit contrast with the understanding of power expressed by Jesus in this passage?” as they listen to the reading.
- Read Mark 9:33-35.
- Invite participants to find a partner and to share briefly their answers to the question, “How does the understanding of power held by the Most Powerful Man in the skit contrast with the understanding of power expressed by Jesus in this passage?” Allow two minutes for this sharing.
- In the full group, invite partners to share one key insight from their discussion.

□ **Understanding the Roles and Powers of Nation-States** (15 minutes)

- Distribute the handout, “Understanding the Roles and Powers of Nation-States” to all participants. It is found in Appendix C.
- Allow participants three minutes to read the handout.
- Use the following questions to discuss the handout:
  - What parallels do you see between these understandings and the skit?
  - What parallels do you see between these understandings and the understanding of power articulated by Jesus in the passage from Mark? What differences do you see?

- What differences would these different understandings make in how nation-states use their power?

□ **Bible Study** (5 minutes)

- Tell participants that you will read Mark 9:33-35. Invite participants to consider the question, “What does God invite you to do or be or change through this passage?” as they listen to the reading.
- Read Mark 9:33-35.
- Invite participants to find a partner and to share briefly their answers to the question, “What does God invite you to do or be or change through this passage?”

□ **Closing Prayer** (2 minutes)

- Invite participants to pray together the Lord’s Prayer.

## Appendix A

### Oikoumene: A Skit (Multi Part Version)

**Narrator:**

*(Spoken while others act)*

One night in a little house that was safe and snug some children were reluctant to go to bed after dinner. The mother of the house made a fire while the father of the house cleaned up some dishes. In the gathering darkness, the children of the house played with one another in front of the fire. They were being very silly and having quite a lot of fun. The mother and the father watched their children play. Running back and forth in front of the fire the children looked black and white and red and yellow as the shadows of the evening mixed with occasionally popping logs and rising flames rose to make the room darker or lighter. When night finally fell the parents told the children that it was time for bed.

**Children:**

No, no! We want a story first.

**Narrator:**

*(Spoken while others act)*

So out of the darkness the father pulled a chair. And the mother threw down a blanket in front of the fire. And the children's grandmother came and sat down on the chair. This is the story she told –

**Grandmother:**

Once, long ago, there was a town where people were always fighting. The name of the town was Oikoumene.

**Children:**

*(Giggling)* It sounds like the noise a pig makes. Oink Oink.

**Grandmother:**

Yes, sometimes it does sound funny, but other times I'll say it to myself and it will sound beautiful. It is a funny word. Anyway, you shouldn't laugh. This was a terrible time. Back then people believed they had reasons to fight against each other, and so they did. Even though no one really liked the fighting, many believed that it was the only way to eventually reach some sort of peace. Of course they were all looking for peace in one way or another. What else would they do?

Now, in this town there was one man who was very powerful.

*(Man stands)*

He was strong.

*(Man flexes)*

And he knew it.

*(Man continues to flex)*

There was no one else in the town anywhere near as strong. In the whole history of the town no one could ever remember a man who had been so powerful.

*(Townspople surround man and scratch their heads)*

Now this man realized that there were certain responsibilities and obligations that came with being the strongest. He was not a bad man, of course, not at all. It's just that he was so powerful.

The most powerful man lived a very good and rich life. There were some in the town who lived very sad and poor lives. A lot of people lived in between.

*(People stretch out in line that begins with Man standing tall and ends with someone on the floor)*

When he had first become so strong he wanted to make sure the other people in the town knew that they could all still be friends.

*(Man walks around shaking hands with townspeople)*

The most powerful man and the townspeople made agreements as to how they ought to live together. The most powerful man said he would respect these agreements because that was the right thing to do. Of course there were times that the most powerful man didn't quite keep up his end of the agreements and there were also times when the other people in the town tried to get around their part of the agreement. Sometimes the disagreements got so bad that they fought.

*(Man hangs his head in shame and townspeople glare, then townspeople hang their heads in shame and Man glares.)*

But if they fought they would make up, realize that they hadn't lived up to their agreements, and try to live by them again. This is the way life went.

*(Mock fighting and more hand shaking then townspeople move away and Man stands alone pondering)*

Then one day the most powerful man decided that he didn't want to live by any of the agreements anymore. He worried that maybe he wouldn't stay the most powerful man forever. He decided that he needed to do whatever it might take to make sure that he did stay the most powerful.

**Most Powerful Man:**

I have to be sure that none of my neighbors they can become more powerful than I am. I like being powerful. It feels good to be powerful. The best way to defend my power is to make certain no one can challenge me.

**Grandmother:**

The more he thought about it, the more the most powerful man became convinced this was a good thing to do. In the end he even felt sure that the other townspeople would thank him for it.

**Most Powerful Man:**

I am not a bad man after all. I won't punish anyone who doesn't deserve it. And once I've proved myself as the most powerful man all fighting will stop. Who would dare try to fight when they knew what I could do? Lives will be easier. People will be freer. They will have more peace. Of course, I know how folks are. They don't always know what's best for them. Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to, things that are hard to do and that people might get mad at you for before they realized you were doing it to help them. I'm doing the right thing though. In the end they'll thank me. It's just along the way that it might be uncomfortable.

**Grandmother:**

So the most powerful man went out and made sure everyone knew he was the most powerful man.  
*(Man passes by and townspeople drop one by one)*

Now when the other townspeople saw what was happening they began to be worried. The most powerful man had never openly abused his power. Yet suddenly the most powerful man began to act unlike himself.

He began to charge the other townspeople a lot of money to allow them to sell their products in the market.  
*(Man holds out a hand to townspeople.)*

He told the head of the town police force that he didn't think he ought to have to follow the town laws any more.  
*(Man wags his finger at townspeople.)*

He even went so far as to tell the head of the fire department that he didn't care if the smoke from his chimney was getting into other people's houses.  
*(Man shrugs shoulders)*

After all he argued, he needed a big fire to make sure that the town was safe at night.

After a while the other townspeople decided that they needed to make new agreements among themselves that would help protect them against the most powerful man.  
*(Townspeople huddle)*

Then, slowly, at first in little groups, then all together, the townspeople began to speak up. And wonder of wonder, their voices together were louder than the voice of the most powerful man. And together they said things like –

**Townspeople:**

*(Townspeople raise their voices. What begins as a murmur increases in volume, but no actual words are discernable. Standing apart the Man mouths empty syllables. At the height of the noise all sound stops and the space clears save for the children and grandmother.)*

**Narrator:**

*(Children lay their heads down as if asleep)*

By that time, however, the fire had died down, and the children had fallen asleep and were dreaming. But in their sleep they smiled, because they had already begun to feel very strong themselves.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Oikoumene: A Skit (Three Part Version)**

**Narrator:**

One night in a little house that was safe and snug some children were reluctant to go to bed after dinner. The mother of the house made a fire while the father of the house cleaned up some dishes. In the gathering darkness, the children of the house played with one another in front of the fire. They were being very silly and having quite a lot of fun. The mother and the father watched their children play. Running back and forth in front of the fire the children looked black and white and red and yellow as the shadows of the evening mixed with occasionally popping logs and rising flames rose to make the room darker or lighter. When night finally fell the parents told the children that it was time for bed.

**Children:**

No, no! We want a story first.

**Narrator:**

So out of the darkness the father pulled a chair. And the mother threw down a blanket in front of the fire. And the children's grandmother came and sat down on the chair. This is the story she told –

**Grandmother:**

Once, long ago, there was a town where people were always fighting. The name of the town was Oikoumene.

**Children:**

It sounds like the noise a pig makes. Oink Oink.

**Grandmother:**

Yes, sometimes when I say it does sound funny, but other times I'll say it to myself and it will sound beautiful. It is a funny word. Anyway, you shouldn't laugh. This was a terrible time. Back then people believed they had reasons to fight against each other, and so they did. Even though no one really liked the fighting, many believed that it was the only way to eventually reach some sort of peace. Of course they were all looking for peace in one way or another. What else would they do?

Now, in this town there was one man who was very powerful.

He was strong.

There was no one else in the town anywhere near as strong. In the whole history of the town no one could ever remember a man who had been so powerful.

Now this man realized that there were certain responsibilities and obligations that came with being the strongest. He was not a bad man, of course, not at all, but he was so powerful.

The most powerful man lived a very good and rich life. There were some in the town that lived very sad and poor lives. A lot of people lived in between.

When he had first become so strong he wanted to make sure the other people in the town knew that they could all still be friends.

The most powerful man and the townspeople made agreements as to how they ought to live together and the most powerful man said he would respect them because that was the right thing to do. Of course there were some times that the most powerful man didn't quite keep up his end of the agreements and there were also times when the other people in the town tried to get around their part of the agreement. Sometimes the disagreements got so bad that they fought.

But if they fought, they would make up, realize that they hadn't lived up to their agreements and try to live by them again. This is the way life went.

Then one day the most powerful man decided that he didn't want to live by any of the agreements anymore. He worried that maybe he wouldn't stay the most powerful man forever. He decided that he needed to do whatever it might take to make sure that he did stay the most powerful.

So he said, *"I must make sure that none of my neighbors thinks he can become more powerful than I am. Surely the best way to defend my position as the most powerful man, is to use my power to make sure no one else can challenge me."*

This was a good thing to do the most powerful man thought, and in the end the other townspeople would thank him for it.

He thought, *"I am not a bad man after all. I will not punish anyone who does not deserve it. Then, when everyone knows once and for all that I am the most powerful man there will be no more fighting. Who would dare to fight when they knew I would stop them at once? People will be freer. They will have more peace in their lives. Of course, I know how people are. They don't always know what is best for them. Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to, things that are hard to do and that people would get mad at you for before they realize you are doing it to help them. In the end they will thank me. It's just along the way things might have to be uncomfortable."*

So the Most Powerful Man went out and made sure everyone knew he was the most powerful man.

Now when the other townspeople saw what was happening they began to be worried. The most powerful man had always been the strongest of them all but the most powerful man had never openly abused his power. Yet suddenly the most powerful man seemed to be wanting to be even more powerful.

He began to charge the other townspeople a lot of money to allow them to sell their products in the market.

He told the head of the town police force that he didn't think he ought to have to follow the town laws any more.

He even went so far as to tell the head of the fire department that he didn't care if the smoke from his chimney was getting into other people's houses.

After all he argued, he needed a big fire to make sure that the town was safe at night.

After a while the other townspeople decided that they needed to make new agreements among themselves that would help protect them against the most powerful man.

Slowly, at first in little groups, then all together, the townspeople began to speak up. And wonder of wonder, their voices together were louder than the voice of the most powerful man. And together they said things like –

**Narrator:**

*(Interrupts Grandmother as Children lay their heads down as if asleep.)*

By that time though the fire had died down and the children had fallen asleep and were dreaming. But in their sleep they smiled, because they had already begun to feel very strong themselves.

# APPENDIX C

## Understanding the Roles and Powers of Nation-States

<p><b>The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002</b></p>	<p><b>United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report, 2002</b></p>	<p><b>Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America</b> The 192nd General Assembly (1980)</p>
<p>The United States possesses unprecedented - and unequaled - strength and influence in the world. Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society, this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations and opportunity. The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom. p.1</p>	<p>Many argue that the imbalances of global political and economic power also make unrepresentative decision-making inevitable at the intergovernmental level. This argument has considerable force. Notably, the influence of the United States over institutions such as the IMF and WTO has little to do with formal voting power - and much to do with the global standing of the United States. p. 8</p>	<p>Christians understand that only God is absolute. No political order has an absolute claim upon people, nor does any political order so entirely lack aspects of God's purpose as to make its complete annihilation all that is called for. All nations are judged, as Amos suggested, by the standards of divine justice. p. 20</p>
<p>The concept of free trade arose as a moral principle even before it became a pillar of economics. If you can make something that others value, you should be able to sell it to them. If others make something that you value, you should be able to buy it. This is real freedom, the freedom for a person - or a nation - to make a living. p. 18</p>	<p>International trade rules have also worked against the economic interests of developing countries and failed to restrain protectionism in industrialized countries, especially through antidumping rules and other nontariff barriers. On average, industrial country tariffs on imports from developing countries are four times those on imports from other industrialized countries. p. 7</p>	<p>International arrangements that disadvantage many for the sake of a few can no longer be "safely" maintained. Peace, therefore, involves economic justice as well as political fairness. p.23</p>
<p>The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively. p. 15</p>	<p>Many hoped that the September 11 terrorist attacks would inspire global unity in confronting the challenges of national and international governance. And there have been encouraging signs in that direction, such as the increased aid committed at the March 2002 Conference on Financing for Development. But there is an equally strong possibility that the attacks and their aftermath will further weaken global institutions, undermine human rights and exacerbate social and economic fragmentation. p. 9</p>	<p>There are no quick or easy answers to the ambiguities and paradoxes of entangled good and evil in which we find ourselves. Fear must be overcome with faith, hate with trust, enmity with reconciliation, injustice with justice. In accepting this challenge we rely not in our own strength or shrewdness but in the surprising grace of God and are buoyed by the vision: "and people will come from east to west, and from north and south, and sit at the table on the kingdom of God." (Lk. 13:29.) p. 24</p>
<p>We will take the actions necessary to ensure that our efforts to meet our global security commitments and protect Americans are not impaired by the potential for investigations, inquiry or prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction does not extend to Americans and which we do not accept. p. 31</p>	<p>Increased pluralism in global politics has also been aided by new forms of collaboration between governments and global civil society groups. Perhaps the most successful example is the 1998 treaty seeking to establish the International Criminal Court. Despite the opposition of several major countries, the treaty was recently ratified – reflecting the support mobilized by hundreds of human rights organizations around the world. p. 8</p>	<p>More and more people have begun to realize that the main problems of the world will not yield to military solutions, and that whatever new solutions can be found must be global. Believing there must be a better way than prevails, numerous citizens are finding the grace to abandon obsolete attitudes that now work against peacemaking. p. 14</p>

View the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002* online at [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/c7889.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/c7889.htm) . You may download the entire strategy in .pdf format or individual sections in .html format. The citations used in this table refer to the .pdf file. May 2003.

View the *Overview of the United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report, 2002* online at [www.undp.org/hdr2002/overview.pdf](http://www.undp.org/hdr2002/overview.pdf) . You may download the entire report or individual chapters at [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org) . The citations used in this table refer to the *Overview*. The document is in .pdf format. May 2003.

View *Peacemaking: the Believers' Calling* online at [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/believers.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/believers.pdf). The document is in .pdf format. May 2003.

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