

*Uncommon Wisdom
for Greater Ministry Impact*

48

LAWS
OF
SPIRITUAL
POWER

FRANK VIOLA

*Author of *Insurgence**

48 Laws of Spiritual Power



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*To every person who dared to put their hand to
the plow of God's work—including those yet to be born.*

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PRELUDE

Effective Ministry and Spiritual Power

I wrote this book for two groups of people:

1) Those who regularly preach or teach God’s Word. This includes pastors, teachers, missionaries, and church planters, both inside and outside the institutional church.¹

2) All of God’s people. Why? Because every true disciple of Jesus is called to be a servant—a minister—in some capacity. Paul reminded the new converts in Thessalonica that they had “turned to God from idols to *serve* the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Every one of us who knows the Lord can have the glorious privilege of saying of Christ, “He is the One ‘whose I am, and whom I serve’” (Acts 27:23, KJV).

If you are in Christ, your entire life is a “mission trip.”

The word *minister* in the New Testament simply means “servant.”

Paul of Tarsus took the concept a step further when he described his service to God using the term *bondservant* (Romans 1:1, NKJV).

Paul saw himself as a bonds slave of Jesus Christ. His greatest boast was that he belonged to Christ and had the high honor of serving Him.

Unfortunately, many Christians today equate serving the Lord with church activities. But true service, according to the New Testament, is about advancing God’s kingdom and destroying the works of the devil.

And these tasks require spiritual power.

I designed this book to set forth 48 laws of obtaining spiritual power for effective ministry.

As Paul put it in his most sublime letter,

I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.

EPHESIANS 1:19-20, NLT

Spiritual power is another way of describing the dynamic energy of God. We could also call it God's "anointing."

Consider what happened when Samuel anointed David:

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.

1 SAMUEL 16:13

Consider also this passage from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners.

ISAIAH 61:1

Jesus initially fulfilled this text when John baptized Him in the Jordan River and the Spirit of God came upon Him to launch His incredible ministry.² But the passage also applies to all who are in Christ and who continue His ministry today.³

The word *anointing*, therefore, isn't relegated to the Pentecostals or the charismatics. It's a term used throughout the Bible (Exodus 40:15; Leviticus 8:12; 1 John 2:27; Acts 10:38, etc.).

The Origin of the Laws

One of the most amazing truths in the universe is that God entrusts fallen human beings with His power. T. Austin-Sparks, a former pastor and one of the most Christ-centered and spiritually insightful men who ever lived, put it best when he wrote,

God puts Himself into the hands of men. God is not going to move unless there are those who prevail with Him.⁴

Spiritual power—or God's anointing—can increase or decrease in a person's life.

Robert Greene's bestselling book *The 48 Laws of Power* inspired the title of this volume. Greene's book promotes the leveraging of human power through manipulation and selfishness. By contrast, this book promotes the leveraging of spiritual power through self-denial and the application of divine principles borne out in Scripture.

All the laws I explore either increase spiritual power in one's ministry or reduce it.

I've served the Lord for more than three decades, and I've discovered each of these "laws" either through my own mistakes (my rap sheet of mistakes is about as long as a telephone pole), by observing others put them into effect (for better or worse), or through my own personal labors in the Lord.

I gave an early (and clumsy) rough draft of this book to more than one hundred Christian leaders at an annual mastermind I facilitate.⁵ The group included pastors, seminary professors, Bible teachers, missionaries, and church planters.

Most of these leaders said that the 48 laws were new to them,

despite their theological training. Their encouraging words convinced me to professionally publish this book.

If you and I are to survive and thrive in ministry, we need to know about and apply the laws of God's work.

The Goal

My goal in writing this book is to encourage, inspire, and equip you for greater impact in God's kingdom. I hope, therefore, that you'll reflectively read each chapter with a heart open toward the Holy Spirit. As you do, I pray that He will speak to your heart and take you to new levels of ministry and beyond.

At the end of the book, I provide a web page that contains several never-before-released talks I delivered in pastors conferences and leadership trainings throughout the United States.

In these talks, I drill down on some of the 48 laws and add further observations about God's work.

I've intentionally kept each chapter short, distilling each law to its essence. Whenever I determined a particular law could use further illumination, I provided an illustration or story to demonstrate it in action.

The five codas at the end of the book are just as important as the chapters. (Coda means a concluding section.) If you go to 48Laws.net, you'll find several related audios and six more codas.

Two final words.

First, some laws may appear to contradict others, but this is a mark of their truthfulness. Biblical truth is often paradoxical. Jesus is fully God but also fully human. The Bible exhorts us to judge, yet it also tells us to judge not.⁶ And consider these two proverbs that sit right next to each other:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
 or you yourself will be just like him.
 Answer a fool according to his folly,
 or he will be wise in his own eyes.

The laws of spiritual power often follow this paradoxical pattern. In some contexts, a law will apply one way, but in another context, it applies an opposite way. You'll see what I mean as you read.

The point: Aristotelian logic always breaks down in the light of God's eternal truth.

Second, I encourage you to supplement this work with two other resources. One is my landmark book, *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*. The other is *Hang On, Let Go: What to Do When Your Dreams Are Shattered and Life Is Falling Apart*.

If you understand the gospel of the kingdom and embrace it, as I explain in *Insurgence*, you will find it easier to implement the 48 laws.

In addition, understand that, as a minister of Jesus Christ, you *will* go through some gut-grinding hardships. Some will be so horrific that they defy description. *Hang On, Let Go* will help you to be developed rather than destroyed by them.

Let's begin.

LAW 1

Never Hurt God's People

This first law is on a par with the Law and the Prophets. The cardinal law above all others is to never hurt God's people.

Before you nod in agreement, let me unravel what I mean.

Countless ministers have inflicted pain on the Lord's sheep while trying to advance their own ministries.

They not only defend themselves when under attack (perceived or real), but they seek to sever the heads of their detractors and "slaughter the villains."

Such fleshly reactions prove that they don't know the ways of God. (Perhaps they know them in their minds but not in their hearts.)

I refer not only to the obvious, like the pastor who robs his church blind and scandalously spends church money set aside for missions on extravagant personal expenses.

Hurting God's people is often more subtle.

I've known some incredibly gifted men in my life who have hurt the Lord's people in the following ways:

- Insulting individuals privately and publicly when they felt threatened by them.
- Outright lying to manipulate an outcome.
- Threatening people when they believed their reputation was at stake or they wanted to take full credit for something.

- Masking hatred with sarcasm and ridicule with humor.
- Leveling false accusations against people in order to put them down and lift themselves up. (This is usually done out of jealousy or a spirit of competition. See 1 Samuel 18:1-16 for an example.)
- Mocking people out of envy.
- Demeaning those who make them feel insecure.
- Employing guilt, condemnation, fear, and/or shame to motivate God's people into doing something, even things believed to be right and good (more on this later).
- Correcting a believer in an ungracious way.
- Using people to advance their own ministries.

Such things wound the Lord's people at best or devastate them at worst. The result is a carnage-filled trail of damaged souls, lost friendships, broken relationships, and zero peers.

The Lost Art of Taking the High Road

Over the years, I've watched ministers engage in some of these tactics, resulting in massive wreckage. They leave people's lives in shambles, with no easy road back to healing.

Those who behave in these ways haven't learned to free themselves from their own self-sabotage.

By contrast, the Lord always calls His workers to take the high road, to repeatedly absorb the blows for the sake of God and His people. And most importantly, to hand their egos over to the cross (more on that later).

Consequently, like the Lord Jesus Himself, God's servants can endure injustice, mistreatment, and misuse without moving into the flesh and responding in kind.

They're also secure enough in themselves to not feel threatened by or jealous of other servants whom the Holy Spirit is using.

Put another way, God has called His stewards to put themselves in front of the train before sacrificing one of the Lord's sheep.

For this reason, Paul told Timothy that the Lord’s servant must be kind to everyone, “patiently enduring evil” (2 Timothy 2:24, esv).

That said, damage is sometimes inevitable. Some people will take offense, even if it’s not your fault.

Still, hurting God’s people is never an option.

It disheartens me to write this next sentence, but Christian leaders who have been sufficiently broken, who respond gently when criticized, who react with grace when corrected, who feel no jealousy toward others whom God has gifted, who don’t feel threatened by those who have God’s favor, and who refuse to return evil for evil are rarer than red diamonds.

Yet this is the standard to which the Lord has called each of us who serve Him.

The good news is that if you’ve hurt the Lord’s people in the past, you have time to apologize to them and not repeat the same mistake.

In my early years in ministry, I made some boneheaded decisions that ended up hurting the Lord’s people. Thankfully, I quickly apologized and made things right whenever I could.

Though some people will never accept your apology, the Lord will honor it if your apology is sincere and you’ve truly repented. And it’s really His opinion that matters, anyway.

Scratch a Christian and Find Out What’s Underneath

The most dangerous person on the planet is the one who will do anything to save his or her own work. But we have not so learned Christ.¹

Most Christian leaders hurt God’s people when they are attacked, criticized, or threatened, and they react in an ungodly way in order to “win.”

I recall speaking at a conference with a group of other leaders. When the conference ended, some of us who ministered had lunch together.

One speaker, a well-known pastor, was livid. He began to describe to us a letter he had received from one of his congregants.

We could detect his smoldering anger as he rehearsed the letter, written by a woman who raised a legitimate concern.

She had tried to reach the pastor about an issue important to her, and it puzzled her why he didn't respond, despite her many attempts.

The pastor summarily dismissed her.

Instead of owning the problem, the pastor threw his chest out and told us how wrong this woman was for expecting him to respond to her. He bellowed, "I'm so tired of morons like this!"

Unhinged, he finally peeled off a letter to her. He laced his angry tirade with snide comments as part of his defense. He intended to "put her in her place" and justify himself as he did so.

He eviscerated her with his words.

This all proved one thing: Although this man could speak well in front of an audience, he knew nothing of the cross of Jesus Christ.

He knew nothing of brokenness.

He knew nothing of losing.

He reacted purely out of the flesh.

Equally sad, it appeared that none of his buddies saw this for what it was. None of them called him out on it. Instead, they quietly affirmed his fleshly reaction.

They, too, had been taught to castigate the opposition.

Here's the point: *The reality of your discipleship gets exposed whenever you get scratched.*

Those who truly walk in the Lord, not in pious rhetoric but in reality, can get scratched and not fire back.

They know how to absorb the hits and exhibit the Spirit of the Lamb in the face of criticism and persecution.

If this well-known pastor got in the flesh because a sister in Christ expressed her dismay that he didn't respond to her, then what would he do if someone attacked him unjustly or slandered him with malicious intent?

If racing against mere men makes you tired,
 how will you race against horses?
 If you stumble and fall on open ground,
 what will you do in the thickets near
 the Jordan?

JEREMIAH 12:5, NLT

I don't think I have to answer that question.

I wish I could say that this was the only time I've seen this sort of thing.

I've watched famous Christians respond similarly—defensively and in the flesh—and I've thought, *How can they lead God's people while showing no signs of the cross in their lives?*

The cross is never easy to absorb. Not for you or for me.

When I first began serving the Lord in my midtwenties, at times I reacted in the flesh. I would get upset when I felt someone had treated me unjustly. I sometimes reacted with sarcasm when it would have been better to remain silent.

But the Lord used those mistakes to teach me the profound lesson to never, ever—under any condition—hurt God's people.

But to lose instead.

The Lord wasn't wasting His breath when He said,

Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

MATTHEW 10:38-39, ESV

Herein lies a critical principle: When we lose, lay our lives down, and absorb mistreatment for Jesus' sake, then God gives His power to us.

Paul underlines this discovery when he describes the pain he endured from his "thorn in the flesh."

He [Jesus] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10

I believe Paul’s “thorn” was a man motivated by Satan who mounted a calculated assault on Paul’s life and work.² But even if you disagree, the undisputed point is that God’s power rests upon us when we are humbled.

So you, dear Christian leader, whether actual or aspiring, how do you react when someone scratches you?

Don’t make the mistake of silencing your conscience or justifying yourself. We all make mistakes. We all blow it from time to time.

But if you automatically react in the flesh and no instinct in you tells you that your reaction is carnal, then something is desperately wrong with your heart.

Here’s a yardstick to evaluate your spiritual maturity: How do you react when threatened? And what do you do when under pressure?

I don’t care how many followers you have on social media, how big your congregation is, or what big names you can drop. This question gets down to the naked reality of what you’re made of.

Your reaction to criticism and pressure reveals more about your spiritual stature than all the glorious messages you’ve ever delivered, all the books you’ve ever signed, or all the “great” people you’ve taken selfies with.

Unfortunately, the air of brokenness is too rarified for many ministers to breathe today. So I exhort you: Stand apart and breathe it in.

Confront your own self-sabotage and never hurt God’s people. Be willing to die instead.

Even if it means losing your work.