

## 'Chappaquiddick' and the Temptation of Self-Preservation

APRIL 6, 2018 | Brett McCracken

We live in a world where power is often understood in Darwinian/Nietzschean terms of strength and self-preservation: fighting doggedly to maintain one's power and doing whatever it takes to survive, even if it comes at the cost of another's suffering.

We see this everywhere—including in ourselves—but politics is perhaps the most obvious arena for its display. Having achieved the heights of power, many politicians are desperate to keep it, come what may. They respond to scandals with spin. They blameshift on Twitter. They silence or discredit accusers. They avoid admitting fault or acknowledging flaws, lest they appear weak.

Worldly power corrupts, in part, because it demands self-preservation. And self-preservation leads to all sorts of bad things.

The new film *Chappaquiddick*—about Ted Kennedy's infamous 1969 scandal involving a car accident on Chappaquiddick Island, Massachusetts—captures this dynamic well. The film offers a chastening, timely picture of the corrosive effects of power and the compromises we make in the name of self-preservation.

**The film is not just about Kennedy. It's also about us.**

*Chappaquiddick* is about one politician's decision to place power above conviction, protecting himself rather than speaking the truth. But the film is not just about Kennedy. It's also about us.

Directed by John Curran (*The Painted Veil*), the film narrates the disturbing events of July 18, 1969, in which Kennedy (brilliantly played by Jason Clarke) drove a car off a bridge with a young woman, Mary Jo Kopechne (Kate Mara), in the passenger seat. After somehow escaping the car as it filled with water, Kennedy left the scene without rescuing Kopechne, who drowned in the submerged car. He didn't report the incident to the police for 10 hours.

What exactly happened that night is something only Kennedy knows, which makes a film like this especially intriguing (and tricky). There were no witnesses. But the looks of it were immediately damning for the rising-star senator with

presidential aspirations. Before Kopechne's body is even removed from the car, headlines are being written and Kennedy handlers are mobilizing at the family compound to formulate a PR response. Kennedy patriarch Joe (Bruce Dern) can hardly speak, but the one word of advice he does give his son is disturbing: "alibi."

While a team of Kennedy loyalists rally around him, fighting for his political future in the wake of the "incident," a remnant in his inner circle advise him that the honorable thing would be to resign from political life. A girl is dead, after all—one who Kennedy drove off a bridge. But Kennedy—like so many powerful figures faced with the choice between truth and self-protection—does not choose the honorable path.

"I'm not going to be the one who is defined by my flaws," he says in the film, insistent that he has the conviction and political vision America needs.

Feeling the weight and expectations of his family name, Kennedy is determined to not let the incident undo his political ascendance or his family's legacy. He is morally troubled by what happened, but not so much that he's willing to give up his ambitions.

The Kennedys are defined by a "moral compass," he argues, and their "flaws" should not have the last word.

Indeed, the "no one's perfect!" defense of amoral politicians—one that in 2018 is marshaled most fervently by those who claim the mantle of Christian morality—shows up in one of the more clever lines of the film, fully exposing Kennedy's hubris:

"Moses had a temper. Peter betrayed Jesus. And I have Chappaquiddick," Kennedy says.

His cousin Joe Gargan (Ed Helms) responds: "Moses had a temper, but *he never left a girl at the bottom of the Red Sea.*"

## **Failure of Integrity**

*Chappaquiddick* is about the failure of integrity and the failure to accept the consequences of sin. But it's also about the disgusting outworking of Darwinian power, which discards the weak and justifies all manner of corruption (lies, cover-ups, non-disclosure agreements, pay-offs) in the name of self-preservation.

It's a film that asks us –and we Christians need urgently to hear this point– whether we too would choose self-preservation over integrity if our status and power were at stake.

Is moral compromise necessary in order to survive? When we see our power and status threatened, the temptation is huge to grab hold of worldly power, eliminating opposition and holding ground at all costs.

But this is not the way of Jesus. This is not the picture of power we see the New Testament.

Jesus could have chosen self-preservation. At the critical moment, when his survival was at stake, Jesus could have told Pilate, “If you protect me, I will be your most devoted faith-based adviser. I will help win you favor among my followers.”

But he didn't. Jesus did not compromise his mission for the sake of survival. He chose sacrifice.

## **Weakness Shames the Strong**

Jesus inverted the worldly logic of power and weakness. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:27, “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

What does this mean for Christians? It means we shouldn't subscribe to the worldly, Darwinian view of power as a survival-of-the-fittest contest that favors the “winners,” mocks the “losers,” and devalues the weak (the unborn child, the terminally ill, the immigrant, the refugee, the homeless, the disabled) as problems to solve or unfortunates to be pitied. We should see weakness and

fragility (in ourselves and in others) not as things of shame to be discarded or covered up, but as means of grace and instruction.

Weakness teaches us that Christ's grace is sufficient, that his power is made perfect in weakness.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

In *Chappaquiddick*, Kennedy sees weakness only as a liability. The film shows the tragic juxtaposition between Kennedy's private moments, where weakness is visible (sleeplessness, stress, the agony of guilt), and his public moments, where weakness is hidden (aside from a fake neck brace) and a proud, polished, in-control image is projected.

Viewers will rightly see the deception of this image as pathetic—a vivid example of how weakness shames the strong. But we're all implicated here. Especially in today's social media environment where one's “image” of strength and perfection can be so disconnected from the hiddenness of our weakness, we're all prone to covering up and cropping out our flaws, deceiving ourselves (and those around us) into believing we have it all together.

Or maybe we leverage our “flaws” for our benefit, framing them in just the right way to win “authenticity” points in a society increasingly skeptical of hypocrisy and too-perfect facades. But this is just another iteration of self-preserving power.

By God's grace, our weaknesses and flaws do not define us. But they do teach us, if we are willing to learn. And they do exhibit power and glory. Just not our own.