

The Lord's Supper: The School of Kings

Luke 22

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

This is now our fourth sermon on the institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke's gospel. It is, we've seen, the feast of the eschatological kingdom. It is the liquid and edible gospel. It is the feast of the new covenant. And today we will see that it is the school of kings. We will be looking at the last portion of the gospel reading, namely verses 22-30. And we will make two points: the kings of the Gentiles in verses 24-27. And the kings of the kingdom in verses 28-30.

I. The King of the Gentiles

First, then, the kings of the Gentiles. At the outset, please notice, we are still in the context of the Passover meal and the establishing of the Supper. This is clear from two things. First, Jesus speaks of reclining and serving at table and refers to himself as the One serving. And second, the reference, at the end of our text, to eating and drinking at his table in his kingdom shows we are still in the atmosphere of the meal.

So, we have not moved on from the scene of Jesus instituting the Supper. Just prior to our text, Jesus declares that one of them, with him at table, will betray him. And he pronounces a woe on the betrayer. And we are told in v.23, immediately before the part of the text we want to look at today, we are told that "they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this."

We can praise the disciples here. They didn't say: well, it won't be me. One of you guys might betray the Lord, but I never would. They questioned one another --- who is going to do this? The other gospels say they were sorrowful, and they began to say to him, one after another: Is it I, Lord? That's a good question to ask when you come to the Lord's Supper. They didn't assume it was Judas --- they asked about their own possibility of betrayal. And we should do the same. After all, it was our betrayal that caused this body to be broken and this blood to be shed.

We are not beyond betrayal, even as we come to the Supper. We are not beyond treachery even as we appear to be at our most pious. So, to their credit, the

disciples ask the question “is it I?” Am I made of the stuff that could do THAT? Is it I? It’s a profound moment of self-awareness. But this is a masterfully crafted narrative of human psychology. The very next words are: A dispute also arose among them. Notice the word ALSO. It’s like Luke is saying: Oh, in addition to questioning themselves about betraying Christ, they also got into an argument.

It is a stunning, jarring transition. I mean, can you imagine, in this atmosphere, on this night of betrayal and arrest, in the shadow of death, the hour of darkness... in the shock and sobriety of what Jesus does at the Passover meal, when he says his body is about to be given, and his blood about to be poured out...

Can you imagine – at that time – getting into a fight about who is the greatest? It boggles the imagination. How does it go, actually? OK. “I’m not the betrayer and you’re not the betrayer, so let’s talk about who is better? Yes, he’s giving his life away for us, but let’s discuss how we can climb over each other to get to the top? It’s hard to fathom. And yet, and yet, for all that, how profoundly realistic. From all the trappings of sober self-questioning, and apparent humility, to a fight about status and position in the next breath in the same context. From piety to political power plays. They are us and we are them. I mean we have SOME self-awareness, but it usually passes. We forget who we saw in the mirror quickly. We regularly partake of the Supper and violate the unity of the body before we get to the parking lot. Perhaps with a snide or critical or condescending remark about a brother or a sister. Perhaps in a grotesquely silly dispute like the one in our text. *We are inventive at living out a mangled version of the Christian life --- supper or no supper.*

How did this dispute arise? Well perhaps Jesus’ referring to the future banquet, to speaking of sitting at table, raised issues of status and honor among the disciples. This is an honor and shame culture, and earlier in this gospel, Jesus told a parable to those who were invited to a dinner he was attending, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor. Take the lowest place, he said. Do not seek the place of honor. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Later he says: Beware of the scribes, who love the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts. If there’s going to be an eschatological feast, let’s talk about the places of honor. They may have thought it was harmless. Just a question of social etiquette.

So Jesus responds to their dispute. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them.” These are not especially wicked kings. These are the kings of the nations, generally speaking. This is just how the world works, just politics. Just a realistic view of earthly power. They love power, authority, lordship. And they like recognition for their beneficence. They are called benefactors. The wealthy would give generous gifts, for example, to cities, and they would be honored, and it would help keep them in power.

Gift giving becomes a form of manipulation, of leverage and control. And you get the whole quid pro quo – this for that – political system in its wake. (lobbying, horse-trading, and dealmaking) And Jesus is not rejecting *abuses* of power here. He is rejecting this whole system. But not so with you. What DOES he say about seeking to exercise authority, even through your own generosity? He says this: And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.

³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

So much for using gift-giving and wealth as leverage to gain power. Rather, he says, contrary to the kings of the nations, let the greatest among you become as the youngest. That is, as the one with the least status. What political power do children have? They occupy the bottom rung of power relations. Empty yourself out into that form of powerlessness. Yeah – you’re not going to want Jesus as your campaign manager, after all, he lost his earthly campaign pretty badly. Hire somebody with, you know, a little more hard-boiled realism. “Let the greatest become as the least, and the leader as the one who serves.” “Serves” means, who waits tables – which brings us back to our eucharistic context.

Who is greater, he asks, the one who reclines at table, as they were now doing for the Passover, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. True greatness is taking the lowest place. The menial place. The powerless place. Which Jesus is modeling at the Supper. Doing it right there. It’s a radical political witness; which is why he contrasts it to the way the kings of the nations rule.

He models this, not merely because he is serving at the table, but because the mystery of the table is about his suffering servanthood. About his self-emptying, his non-grasping, non-retaliatory, his non-threatening, non-reviling, posture toward his executioners. The body given. The blood poured out. He takes the lowest place. He takes the place of the one who serves. He takes the place of a slave. The form of the suffering, trampled servant. His life, his witness before Pilate and the Jewish Leadership, and especially his death, are the complete opposite, the antithesis to the accepted way of political authority among the kings of the Gentiles. (including our Gentile kings)

And it would be a mistake to think that Jesus thinks this is a temporary expedient. We give up power now, but we get power like the Gentile kings have, later. However we want to speak of exaltation and reigning with Christ, it cannot be read in such a way as negating the teaching here – the “but not so with you.”

There are no scenarios where we exercise lordship the way the kings of the nations do. None. Even Jesus reigns and judges as the slain, but standing,

Lamb. Even in the eschaton, as exalted King, Jesus remains, the servant he is and calls us to be here. For, in Luke 12 he says: Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service, and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. True greatness does not come through taking the lowest place. True greatness IS taking the lowest place. That's the kings of the gentiles.

II. The Kings of the Kingdom

Secondly, the kings of the kingdom. Despite their current folly, Jesus still speaks graciously of the apostles: You are those who have stayed by me in my trials. Then, he makes an astounding promise. I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom. This can be read as follows: I covenant to you, as my Father covenanted to me, a kingdom.

Now, we should not be surprised by this connection. For we have already seen that the eucharist is the feast of the kingdom. And it is the Feast of the New covenant. Get this much: Covenant and Kingdom belong together. For the kingdom comes by way of the new covenant. And kingdom here is future. Yes, the kingdom is here now, but that is not what is in view here. Jesus is assigning the apostles a role in his eschatological, future kingdom. We've already seen him do this twice in this passage. This meal is fulfilled in the kingdom of God, and he wont drink the cup until the kingdom comes.

So we know that he's referring to the future kingdom, when he says: I assign to you a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom. They will eat and drink at his table – where all the power relations and conventions of the political world and its kings are reversed and upended – they eat at his table, in his kingdom and... they will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

What is beyond dispute is the eschatological, future nature of this rule. Jesus says basically the same thing in Matthew 19: Truly, I say to you, in the new world (regenerated cosmos), when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

So the apostles will have some sort of governing, ruling role over the restored Israel of God in the age to come. They will eat at Jesus' table again. They will sit on thrones, and they will judge. They did not do that in their earthly lives. What they got in their earthly lives was martyrdom. Participation in the manner of life the Lord lived on earth, the manner of self-giving unto death, which he set forth on that table. They got the eucharistic life – taking up ones cross, and following the One who presides, and whose death is set forth on the table.

Now, the Apostles are unique, but they also serve as a pattern – for all the saints, Scripture says, will eat and drink with Jesus, all the saints will sit on thrones, and all will reign and participate in judging.

So, in closing, let me step back and draw your attention to the shape of this text. Notice, in v.30, it's my table, in my kingdom – on thrones judging. There's a profound connection between the table, and rule in the kingdom. The table is the school for kings. What does it teach? It teaches us to forsake the pattern of Lordship followed by the kings of the nations, their exercise of authority, their gifts and benefactions. We forsake the places of great status, and seek the lowest place, we seek to be as Jesus who was among us as one who serves. And what that service means is further demonstrated ON the table. The body given. The blood poured out. The way of the cross.

The ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, embodied in Jesus' public witness in the face of unjust, wicked political authority. This is the way Jesus went, and now he is crowned as king of Kings. His estate of humiliation gives way to his estate of glory. Another way to put this is that kingship takes the shape of the cross, of suffering weakness in this age, before it takes the form of resurrection and sitting on thrones judging in the age to come. Jesus lived the life he left us at the earthly table, and he shall, therefore, reign with us, at his heavenly table in his kingdom. The eucharist is the school of kings. It fits you for reigning in the kingdom of God. It forms kings now-- through martyrdom, witness and service—who reign in weakness now, and who will reign in glory then.

Can you imagine if the church even asked the question: what would our politics look like if they were the politics of the eucharist? If the decisive shaping force for our political witness was THAT table? Of course we never ask that question – it's too revealing of our idolatries. Back to the partisan rancor. There is then, in summary, an eschatology of the eucharist. And that eschatology is the eschatology of the Christian life.

How could it be otherwise? The eucharist is a condensed version of the Christian life. The eucharist orients us to heaven itself, where Christ is, and to the coming wedding Supper of the Lamb, and our coming participation in his reign. The eucharist creates (or should) heavenly people, who live out of the age to come, and who yearn for the coming kingdom.

But what about now? What does the eucharist say about now. Well, it says all I've said in this sermon. It says that now, in this age, the power machinations of the Gentiles are unlawful – but not so for you. It says we don't seek status or honor or lordship. It trains us in the way of Jesus' earthly life, the way set forth on the table, the way demonstrated in his witness unto death. The way of weakness and shame, of public humiliation and defeat.

That is the eschatology of the eucharist. And that is the form of Christian existence. That is why that table is the school, the demanding, exacting, wrenching and tearing, disrupting academy of kings. If you want to reign, there's your seminary. Thus far, the American church has largely refused to enroll. But the apostles enrolled, as have a teeming throng of martyrs and faithful witnesses. Jesus is calling you and I to register. That is the eucharist. School is in session. Let him who has ears, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Amen.

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