

The Table Strategy of Christ and His People

(Part 2)

Introduction

The Text

²⁷ After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." ²⁸ And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

²⁹ And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. ³⁰ And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³¹ And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:27–32)

Is the Great Commission a Great Confusion?

- A. Who here is concerned with advancing the mission of God? I imagine most all of us are in some way. Isn't it true that anyone who has ever tasted and seen that the Lord is good will quite naturally want others to taste and see the same?
 - 1. We want to evangelize people into saving relationship with Jesus and disciple people into deeper relationship with Jesus. We want to play our part in the Great Commission, but we often don't know where to start.
- B. The Great Commission can seem to us, at times, a Great Confusion. "Where should I go? What should I do? What should I say?"

Mealtime and the Mission of God

- A. Do you feel this way? If you do, our text this morning provides us with a surprising way forward in the matter.
 - 1. Anybody enjoy bacon and eggs in the morning? Anybody like a good steak or salad in the evening? If you eat food and you love Jesus, then you can participate profoundly in the mission of God!
 - a. For, in our text, it is by way of the table that the kingdom of God is advancing. It is in the sharing of bread and fish and wine that the extravagant grace of God is revealed and received by sinners.

Jesus' Table Strategy: Revealing Redemption

- A. At the center of our text is a meal that Jesus shares with some of outcasts of His day (v. 29).

1. The call of Levi in vv. 27-28 climaxes in this meal. The conflict with the Pharisees in vv. 30-32 revolves around this meal. But it's food, it's the table, that is situated at the center of our text.
- B. Last week we came at this meal from Christ's perspective. We looked at what I called Christ's table strategy—how He uses the table to reveal His redemption.
1. Do you remember that string of texts given to us by Tim Chester? “The Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45); “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10); and “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking . . .” (7:34).
 - a. Eating and drinking with sinners is vital to His mission of seeking, saving, and ransoming them! We see this here with Levi—the traitor, unclean, thief—made fiend. And we will see this again and again as we move through Luke's gospel.
 - i. Jesus has a table strategy. He reveals His redemption around the table. He puts sinners back together around the table.

The Outline

- A. But now, this week, we're ready to shift our focus. We've seen how Christ uses the table to reach Levi and sinners like us. Now we're ready to look at how we can use the table to reach others.
1. And Levi really leads the way for us in this. So we'll start by (1) briefly noting Levi's table strategy; and then (2) we'll move into a discussion concerning our own.

(1) Levi's Table Strategy: Reinforcing Redemption

- A. We cannot miss the fact that this meal, this banquet, this feast happens at Levi's initiative. Levi, so amazed that the Savior would invite a sinner like him to come and follow, quite naturally responds by throwing a party. “God could love me?! Now that's something worth celebrating!”
- B. And Levi's table strategy comes into view when we consider the invite list. You see, this is not just something he's throwing down for him and Jesus alone. He's inviting in everyone he knows.
1. And because he's been rolling with a pretty shady bunch, everyone he knows consists of other tax collectors and sinners: “And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others [whom the Pharisees identify as “sinners” (v. 30)] reclining at table with them” (v. 29).
- C. So where Jesus uses the table to reveal His redemption, Levi uses the table to reinforce this redemption. He uses the table, the shared food and fellowship enjoyed in Christ's presence, as a way of pressing deeper into Jesus, as a way of participating in the Great Commission.
1. Levi couldn't lead a Bible study. He didn't have the four spiritual laws memorized. But he could eat with old friends and introduce them to His Savior.

(2) My Table Strategy: Reinforcing What?

- A. So eating and drinking was central to the Jesus' missional strategy. And eating and drinking became central to Levi's missional strategy.
 - 1. But now we must ask: is it central to ours? Or is the table so simple, so mundane, that we've, to this point, overlooked and neglected its great kingdom potential?
- B. As human beings, we have to use the table in one way or another. There's no question on this point. We have to eat. The question is: how will we use it? What will we reinforce in our hearts and lives by the way we use it?
 - 1. The way I see it, it could go one of two ways: (1) either we will use the table to reinforce some aspect of Christ's redemption; or (2) we will use it to reinforce some aspect of our perversion. We can use it to celebrate His grace or to undermine His grace. But either way, we are using it.
- C. To guide us in our reflection on this point, let me work out four ways that we might use the table, negatively, to reinforce our perversion. And I'll set these one by one in contrast with four ways we can use the table, positively, to reinforce Christ's redemption.
 - 1. There are two paths emerging here, two table strategies. Which will we choose?

Perversion #1: Boundary—"My Space Is Mine"

- A. First, from the side of perversion, we must sadly admit that the table can be used to reinforce our sense of boundary and division. We can use the table not to build bridges but walls.
 - 1. We can use the table to say, "My space is mine!"—"Keep out! You are not welcome here!"
- B. Biblically, we don't have to look far for this. It's right on the surface of our text this morning. The table was used by Pharisees to reinforce who was in and who was out: "You have to eat the right foods, perform the right washings, and live by the right rules...or you don't belong at this table."
 - 1. That's why they're so worked up down in v. 30: "[Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?](#)" "You don't just share the table with these kinds of people!"
- C. Or we might think of what happened with Peter there in Antioch ([Gal 2:11-14](#)). Where, even though he knew the gospel—that Christ, in His death and resurrection, has broken down the boundaries between Jew and Gentile, that all are sinners and welcomed by the Savior to the table of His grace—He stopped eating with Gentiles.
 - 1. He used the table reinforce boundary lines and divisions, undercutting the gospel of grace. "What are you doing, Peter, an apostle, using the table like that?!"
- D. But we can do this in our own way, can't we—use the table to reinforce boundary and division? Some of your most painful memories probably occurred while around the table.

1. That's when mom stormed out on dad and the marriage was over.
2. That's when Thanksgiving dinner ended early and we vowed to never sit around a table with them again, family or not. "Not my family!"
3. Or do you remember Jr. High? Wouldn't you have all but sold your soul to sit at the cool table?

Redemption #1: Hospitality—"My Space Is Yours"

- A. But set against the use of the table in this way, we see that it can instead be used to reinforce Christ's redemption. In particular, it can show something of His hospitality—the hospitality of heaven.
1. Instead of saying, "My space is mine", we can use it to say with all warmth and affection, "My space is yours!"—"You are welcome here. You belong around my table."
- B. We might consider the stunning fact that being "hospitable" (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8) is one of the few things the apostle Paul thought important enough to list as a qualification for eldership.
1. In the Greek, hospitality is a word derived from two root words: philos-xenos, love-stranger. Hospitality, then, quite literally, is "love for stranger".
 - a. And Paul is saying: "That's what I want the leaders to be like, because that's what I want the church to be like, because that's what Jesus is like!" "Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God; He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood."
- C. And we can use our tables to communicate this heavenly reality. "Pull up a seat. Strangers become friends around the table."

Perversion #2: Gluttony—"My Food Is Mine"

- A. Second, from the side of perversion, we must admit that we can use the table to reinforce our Gluttony.
1. We can say in not so many words: "My food is mine!"—"The table is for my appetites and lusts."
- B. We might think of those crowds in [John 6](#) who are clamoring for Jesus the day after He fed the 5000. But He rebukes them by saying: "'[Y]ou are seeking me . . . because you ate your fill of the loaves' (v. 26)...and for no other reason. You want My food, but you aren't interested in Me. This meal, it's all about you. And that's a problem."
- C. Or we might think of that worldly mantra that echoes out from [1 Cor 15:32](#): "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." This life, it's all about my appetites being fulfilled. That's it.
- D. Is that what your table is all about? Is it a fight for the last scoop of ice cream, the last piece of pie? Is it a place for Gluttony...or is it a place for Generosity?

Redemption #2: Generosity—“My Food Is Yours”

- A. The table can actually be used to push against Gluttony. It can be used to reinforce the Generosity of Christ’s kingdom.
 - 1. For those who have tasted of the generosity of Christ, the table is no longer a place where “My food is mine”, it’s a place where “My food is yours!”
- B. Consider Christ’s approach to the table as He describes it to His disciples in [Luke 22:25-27](#): “²⁵The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.²⁶ But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.²⁷ For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”
 - 1. Christ’s table is not about being the guy sitting on the velvet throne with his legs set up off the floor and his hands folded over his chest while his little minions drop grapes in his mouth.
 - a. It’s about the people you’re sharing the meal with—serving them, getting to know them, loving them.
- C. Our mantra is not taken from [1 Cor 15:32](#), it’s taken from [1 Cor 10:31](#): “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”
 - 1. Whatever I do with my eating and drinking let it be done for God’s glory and your good. Let it show you something of His generosity.

Perversion #3: Superficiality—“My Heart Is Mine”

- A. Building off of Boundary and Gluttony, the third aspect of perversion we can reinforce around the table is Superficiality.
 - 1. If Boundary says, “My space is mine”, and Gluttony says, “My food is mine”, Superficiality says, “My heart is mine!”—“I’m not going deep, I’m not sharing life, I’m distant even while I’m present.”
- B. This can happen any number of ways. Something that God’s been convicting me of lately is my use of the phone around the dinner table. Here I have before me a wonderful opportunity to get into the hearts and lives of my wife and kids, but instead I’m cracking off emails, or killing brain cells on Facebook.
 - 1. I’m distant even while I’m present. I’m not getting into hearts, I’m getting things done.
- C. We might think of how the table is used here in the Silicon Valley—as a tool for networking and climbing the social or vocational ladder. Where I know you and you know me but let’s be honest you’re just a means to an end. I’m wining and dining, schmoozing and boozing, so, at the end of the night, I can step on your shoulders and advance myself.

1. There's no sharing of hearts here, just superficiality.

Redemption #3: Intimacy—"My Heart Is Yours"

- A. Set against this kind of table strategy is that which reinforces not Superficiality but Intimacy. The table for Jesus represents His commitment to get into the details of our lives. He cares! He's not flipping through emails, or networking us for selfish gain, He's asking questions about your day, He's moving towards your heart and letting you into His.
 1. So are we using the table to say not, "My heart is mine" but, "My heart is yours"—"I want to know you, really, beneath all the appearances and all the distractions. How are you?"
- B. We might think here of Jesus' interaction around the table with that sinful women in [Luke 7:36-50](#).
 1. Jesus is not interested in the superficiality of the Pharisees and religious men who were sitting there with Him.
 2. He's interested in the women who is pouring out her heart through her eyes. Washing His feet with her tears. That's what He's looking for around the table. Something real. And He speaks right into her heart: "[Your sins are forgiven](#)" (v. 48).
- C. So what about us? Are we using the table to reinforce that? Are our tables a place where everyone better be in their proper seats and looking good? Or are our tables safe places where the real mess of hearts and lives can come out...and Jesus can heal?
 1. One of the ways I'm trying to make the table a safe place for my kids even now is just asking each of them: "What was the high and low of your day? What was great? What was hard? I want to know you and I want you to know me. Because I want all of us to know Jesus."

Perversion #4: Animality—"My God Is Me"

- A. Finally, the fourth aspect of our perversion we can reinforce around our tables, and really the bottom of it all, is what I would call Animality, or animal-likeness. Around our tables we can become something less than human. Our instincts rule us, like animals.
 1. We use the table to say, "My God is me."
- B. Paul speaks of these people in [Phil 3](#) whom he says are: "[enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction . . . they glory in their shame . . . \[their\] minds \[are\] set on earthly things . . . \[and\] their god is their belly](#)" (vv. 18b-19).
 1. It is likely these same people who back up in v. 2 he refers to as "[dogs](#)". Unclean, unruly animals.
- C. The table can be used in such a way that it lowers human beings to the place of animal, where like the prodigal son we find ourselves "[longing to be fed with the pods . . . \[of\] pigs](#)" (Luke 15:16). We're just so deep in sin, so far from home.

Redemption #4: Spirituality—“My God Is Yours”

- A. But the table can be used to move us in the other direction as well. It was when the Prodigal Son remembered the food on His father’s table that he packed up his things and headed for home. The table can actually be used to move us away from Animality and towards Spirituality—it can lift us up and bring us back into the presence of God.
1. We can use our tables to say not, “My God is me”, but, “My God is yours!”—“Not only do I want to share with you my space, my food, my heart...I want to share with you my God. He’s what makes my table the way that is. What you experience here, I hope and pray, is just a little ‘taste’ of heaven.”
 - a. This now is the ultimate trajectory of our table strategy.
- B. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that after Jesus is risen from the dead He reveals Himself to the two on the road to Emmaus through a meal: “³⁰ When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened . . .” (Luke 24:30–31a).
1. It’s in the breaking of the bread that they get it. It’s around the table. And, in a way, this really does make sense. Because meals so wonderfully represent what Jesus is all about. He gives Himself for the nourishment of the world. He is broken for our benefit. He’s the bread of life. He’s the fountain of living water.
 - a. And so it’s not a stretch to move from the physicality of our tables and meals towards spiritual things—towards a discussion of Jesus—His goodness, His grace.
- C. It’s in the breaking of bread that the glory of His grace is often revealed and reinforced in our lives. The hospitality, generosity, intimacy of our meals together provide a wonderful context for spirituality.
1. Consider this example described by Harvie Conn: “Every summer, Dr. Jack Miller at Westminster Theological Seminary takes a large group of students and church members with him for three weeks of street preaching in Dublin, Ireland. They are on the streets almost all day long, witnessing, sharing . . . the gospel. Everyone they speak with is invited to a common meal held in the evening at a nearby church. The meal is quite simple. There are singing, some testimonies, and prayer. Here the unchurched, the curious, the converts, are given a taste of koinonia [fellowship]. One student said to me after that trip, ‘I think the most effective part of our ministry is carried on at the meal table. The guests see the church suddenly as a caring, sharing fellowship; their bargain with God is sealed by a cup of coffee’” (p. 37).

Conclusion

- A. Returning to where we began: do you want to set out on the mission of God? Do you want to be used to advance the kingdom both in making converts and making disciples? It’s not as complicated as we make it out to be.

- B. I think it's fitting that I let Tim Chester address us one last time as we close: "If I pull down books on mission and church planting from my shelves, I can read about contextualization, evangelism matrices, postmodern apologetics, and cultural hermeneutics. I can look at diagrams that tell me how people can be converted or discover the steps required to plant a church. It all sounds impressive, cutting edge, and sophisticated. But this is how Luke describes Jesus' mission strategy: 'The Son of Man came eating and drinking.' . . . It's not complicated" (p. 15).

"One of the great things about mission through meals is that it enfranchises the people of God. We don't have to understand missiological jargon or hold a crowd with our oratory. We don't even need to be able to cook. We just need to be people who eat and people who love Jesus.

I'm not suggesting adding something new to your all too busy schedule. You already eat three meals a day – that's twenty-one ready-made opportunities each week to do mission and community. You could meet up with another Christian for breakfast on the way to work – read the Bible together, offer accountability, pray for one another. You could meet up with colleagues at lunchtime. You could invite your neighbors over for a meal – better still invite them over with another family from church. That way you get to do mission and Christian community at the same time – all the while letting your unbelieving neighbors see the way the gospel impacts our relationships as Christians."

- C. You already eat, you already sit at the table. The questions is: how will you use it?