

The Table Ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

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Over the course of His ministry, Jesus repeatedly creates sacred space over the dinner table, ministering to the hurting and delivering understanding to the proud. These occurrences run like a thread throughout the gospel narrative and are most frequently found in the book of Luke. In Luke's writings, Jesus is described as One Who freely extended hospitality, as well as Someone Who was often the recipient of it, sharing in both physical and spiritual nourishment with people from all walks of life. While His meals shared with those living on the fringes of society were audacious in the eyes of many, they served as the entry point to the Kingdom of God for many more. The intentionality of Jesus' table ministry and implementation of hospitality echoes throughout the Gospel of Luke as He habitually takes a seat next to the marginalized, offering both provision and understanding to their spiritual and physical needs.

The provocative nature of Jesus' eating habits revolved around those with whom He chose to dine with: the marginalized, the oppressed, and the socially outcast. Those He kept company with during His ministry raised eyebrows as well as several questions from the devout, pious people around Him; and this is especially highlighted in the Lukan narrative. Luke was likely a Gentile believer himself, and Jesus' habit of spending time with outsiders may have been especially prominent to him. In the eyes of the rule-followers and the religious leaders of His time, the table ministry of Jesus felt nothing short of being outlandish. Nonetheless, Jesus used the simplicity of a meal to live out His simple mission: to seek and to save the lost. By doing so, He ate with all the wrong characters. The first meal recorded in Luke is no exception, shown in Luke 5:27-32, when Jesus calls Levi (formally known as Matthew), a tax collector, to follow Him. Levi's occupation was a disgrace in the watchful eyes of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, as tax collectors "were a part of a despised system... considered most in need of repentance" (Barker and Kohlenberger 222). Culturally, Levi was considered ritually unclean, his reputation tainted with greed because of his affiliation with Roman occupiers. Despite his abhorrent occupation, Jesus chooses Levi, no doubt with great intention. Consequently, Levi drops everything to follow Him.

This summoning results in a banquet held at the household of Levi, in honor of Jesus. Considering that Jesus was guest of honor, Levi might have felt the need to edit the guest list, but this does not appear to be the case. Instead, he does not hesitate to invite those in his normal circle, along with his former business associates, those who had been labeled as "sinners" by the Pharisees. This gesture of hospitality brought even more religious outcasts to the banquet, welcoming a great number of people into the presence of Jesus. Barker and Kohlenberger's commentary on the New Testament observes that "[n]o act, apart from the participation in the actual sinful deeds of the guests, could have broken the wall of separation more dramatically" (230). Jesus' willingness to sit among people of such various statuses shocked His adversaries, yet His response to their criticism is simple and straightforward in verses 31-32. He counters their indignation by saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick[.] I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." This initial display of Jesus' generosity to the most unlikely of people sets the stage for the rest of Luke's gospel, where Jesus repeatedly wines and dines with a myriad of different characters throughout the course of His time on earth.

The tables that Jesus occupied created a space where both brokenness and blessing collided and where inclusivity was continually prioritized. In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus receives an invitation to dine at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Not only was He willing to sit with those who were considered unclean, but He also chose eat with those who had spent their entire lives making sure they were considered clean. At Simon's house, Jesus is found reclining at a table, when a woman enters the scene. As a local, her sinful reputation followed her into the room. Cultural norms tell us that she was taking "advantage of the social custom that permitted needy people to visit such a banquet to receive some of the leftovers." (Barker and Kohlenberger 237). However, her interactions imply that she had come with the intention of seeing Jesus. Thus, she entered the room fully aware of the ridicule that her presence would elicit. The Scriptures even show Simon's personal thoughts, which reflect his own ostracism toward her. Despite social scorn, she ignores Simon's display of judgment, turning her attention solely to Jesus. She is moved to tears, overcome by His presence, and proceeds to pour costly perfume over His feet and kiss them. This would have been a strange sight to the onlookers that sat around them, as they undoubtedly wore facial expressions of shock, disgust, and secondhand embarrassment for the woman, and especially Jesus. Martin Bucer writes that "[t]he Pharisee thinks to himself that Christ is not a prophet and that it is not in the office of a prophet to welcome just anyone[;] h[e] thinks that Christ is polluted and dishonored by the woman's presence" (George et. al. 164). However, Jesus is not disturbed by her presence but rather intrigued, sensing Simon's disdain for her. As illustrated before, Jesus never misses an opportunity to teach, especially over the dinner table. He tells a parable about the misgivings of greed, directing His focus to Simon. Afterward, He addresses the woman at His feet, verbally forgives her sins, commends her, and sends her on her way with "a traditional benediction, 'go in peace,' though it now has a deeper meaning for her" (Barker and Kohlenberger 237). Amid those considered to be the most reverent of society, the woman kneeling on the floor before Jesus had shown the most reverence of all. In her fervency and humility, she had the audacity to touch Jesus' feet, to pour upon them expensive perfume and anoint Him. Consequently, He responds with a similar air of audacity; addressing her and extending forgiveness to her. Jesus continually crosses constricting cultural and social barriers, blurring the lines in a culture divided between insiders and outsiders.

As the Lukan narrative progresses, Jesus finds Himself the dinner guest once again, this time at the household of an affluent Pharisee in chapter 14:1-24. This dinner party was held on the Sabbath and the text indicates that the religious leaders and teachers of the law were carefully observing Him. In this instance, Jesus is leading the conversation. He asks two different questions but no one answers. Before the meal begins, Jesus' attention is immediately drawn to a man with an abnormal swelling on his body. Fully aware of the Jewish culture regarding the host and company, He asks them whether they believe healing is acceptable on the Sabbath. When they offer no response, Jesus answers His own question. As they look on, He heals the man of his ailment and sends him on his way.

Barker and Kohlenberger observe that "during the silence of the Pharisees and the experts of the law, Jesus met the man's need. His condition could have waited another day, but Jesus was concerned to establish a principle" (260). Through this healing, Jesus reclaims the Sabbath for doing His Father's work. Jesus' statement in this scenario serves as a doorway for those whom society had deemed unredeemable.

However, the meal just begun, and Jesus turns His attention to the rest of the room, observing the dinner party as they carefully choose their seats. Traditionally, seating was determined by a person's social status, "the important places were those nearest the head couch position. If an important person came late, someone might have to be displaced to make room for him" (260). Jesus parabolically reclaims this stigma of honor and shame in Pharisaic culture. Rather than inviting those of heightened status or importance to their meals and celebrations, He instructs the Pharisees to extend hospitality to the underprivileged, the disease-ridden, the hurting, and the broken. He delves into the parable of the great banquet, emphasizing the importance of including marginalized people groups. This heart posture would have been strange and abnormal to His listeners: "[T]he sense of horror involved gives bite to the situation the parable actually refers to: the great reversal that is to come. If everything is going to be reversed when the kingdom of God is established...those who choose now to sit with the poor and lowly are destined for promotion, while those who sit now with the rich and powerful will find themselves ordered down to the lowest places" (Byrne 111). Jesus clearly has different priorities than those around Him: priorities that reflect the reality of this great reversal, of the coming Kingdom. He encourages those He encounters to do the same to ensure that they do not miss the real meaning of His Father's Kingdom. His actions and instruction mandate humility, emphasizing that there is always room at the table.

This story is a trifecta of healing, conversation and parables, demonstrating that hospitality is a matter of the heart.

The ministry of Jesus also speaks to His deep understanding of human existence, mindful of both spiritual and physical needs. This deep comprehension flowed from His keen awareness of both realities, cognizant of the spiritual and physical. This dualism is largely evident in Luke 9:10-17 when the masses follow Jesus and His disciples to Bethsaida. Here He speaks at length about the Kingdom of God, as well as healing the sick. The words He spoke to the crowds that day are not recorded in the Scriptures, but the meal that they shared together is. It is surmised that "most of the crowd came out of curiosity, for entertainment or to see what they might receive from Jesus, but very few out of real faith. While their hearts lacked spiritual hunger, their bellies did not lack physical hunger" (George 193). Jesus was aware of their motives, yet He still chose to provide and cater to their spiritual and physical deficiencies. The disciples were overwhelmed, looking upon the thousands of people; men, women and children alike who had gathered to listen to Jesus speak. While the disciples wanted to send them away, Brendan Byrne observes that "Jesus has other plans. He makes the disciples initiate the provision of hospitality by getting the people to sit down in groups—a clear signal that they are going to be fed. Then, invoking Heaven, blessing, breaking the loaves and the fishes, he miraculously makes it possible for the Twelve to feed the entire multitude. And feed them they do—not merely adequately but so abundantly that even after all were filled, they were able to gather twelve basketfuls of broken pieces" (78). In some wide open places, He prepares the table, picnic-style. While they may have arrived with the motivation of being entertained, they were met with the purest motive of Jesus. Once again, Jesus extends hospitality to meet the needs of people of all ages, both genders, and all demographics, providing for them both physically and spiritually. Not only does He provide, but He does so in abundance, insinuating that His provision is spilling over.

Moreover, Jesus powerfully uses hospitality to open the hearts of humanity to further instill understanding. A primary example of Jesus teaching through hospitality is His interaction with Mary and Martha, an account that is solely found in the book of Luke. While they do not share a meal, Martha extends hospitality to Jesus, opening up her home to Him. Upon His arrival, Martha is preoccupied with the necessary preparations that accompany the arrival of a guest. While she assumes the role of hostess, her younger sister Mary chooses to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to what He has to say. Any other guest might have felt humbled and even honored by Martha's insistent hospitality, but Jesus transforms Martha's distraction into a teaching moment. He observes two very different reactions from Mary and Martha, contrasting their postures to make a point. Mary had assumed the role of a disciple—the correct response in His eyes—and sat at His feet. Conversely, Martha is mistakenly consumed by the work that she must accomplish. Barker and Kohlenberger write that "[i]n comparison with the kingdom, household duties should have a radically diminishing demand on Martha. The word of the Lord had first claim, and for the disciple an attitude of learning and obedience should take first place" (251). Through this, Martha's eyes are opened to an important truth. It is not the mundane ins and outs of everyday life that prove to be noteworthy, but rather, the chance at the abundant life that Jesus offers. Jesus gently corrects Martha's disapproval. He tells her, "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41). While Martha was preoccupied with trivial matters, the spiritual sustenance that Mary had gained by sitting at His feet was eternal and would not fade away.

This theme of hospitality continues after Jesus' resurrection, in Luke 24:28-32, before His ascent into Heaven. On the day of His resurrection, two unnamed disciples are traveling on the road to Emmaus from Jerusalem, recounting and discussing the events of the past few days. It is on this road that they encounter the resurrected Jesus Himself, although at the time they are unable to recognize Him. As the three continue their journey together, the disciples are impressed by His exposition of the Scriptures and knowledge of their Lord, yet they are still unaware of His identity. Upon their arrival at Emmaus, they invite Jesus to lodge with them. Jesus accepts their gesture of hospitality. During their meal, Jesus breaks the bread. Morris observes that by doing this "Jesus went through the motions familiar at the beginning of a Jewish meal, though normally they would have been performed by the host, not a guest" (312). The two disciples finally recognize Him as their Lord when He serves them. They "remembered how their hearts had burnt within them...Jesus' exposition had stirred them deeply. They speak of him as 'opening' the scriptures: when he spoke the meaning hidden in the words of the Bible became clear" (313). Over the dinner table in Emmaus, they become fully aware, both of His identity and the full reality of His resurrection, as He sat across from them and shared a meal. In a striking, humble manner, Jesus reveals Himself as flesh and blood while simultaneously extending food and understanding to these two men.

Jesus' method of drawing people close to Him through a meal is commonplace throughout the gospels and points to something beyond sharing food.

His meals with others were constantly paired with His intentionality to lead people into understanding, repentance, and belief of Himself. As these meals occur throughout His ministry, more people draw close to His side and into the kingdom. As a result, these meals naturally become celebratory and point to a greater, heavenly celebration that is to take place in the future. Jesus often used the simplicity of a meal to foreshadow the coming Kingdom and to signify the beginning of the rapidly approaching New Covenant.

Throughout the New Testament, banquets are continually symbolic of both celebration and joy and are closely tethered to covenantal understanding. The writers of the Synoptics saw these meals through an eschatological lens, mirroring the coming Kingdom and the eschatological banquet of the future. The most emblematic meal is the Last Supper. In Luke 22:14-38, Jesus eats with His disciples one last time in the upper room before His death. This narrative holds several significant motifs, but ultimately this symbolic event is shared over a meal in an intimate fashion. Moreover, the Passover meal holds powerful symbolism because it is held on the day of sacrifice, shortly before Jesus Himself would become the ultimate sacrifice for humanity. Jesus knows that His time is drawing near, yet He calmly chooses to do what He considered important: to sit and eat with the twelve who were closest to Him. Barker and Kohlenberger observe that "the meal is a turning point. Jesus anticipated it; and he likewise anticipates the next genuine meal of its kind that he will sometime in the future when the longed-for kingdom finally comes" (278). Here Jesus presents the elements of the Eucharist to His disciples. Byrne analyzes this specific moment, observing that "at this Passover he is to offer them the hospitality of God in a climactic way and institute something (the Eucharist) that will sacramentally continue that hospitality down the ages" (151). This final meal that Jesus shares with the twelve echoes both symbolism and relevance and initiates the introduction of the New Covenant, the hope that God would make with His people once and for all. His disciples would soon partake in this meal again as a time of remembrance, but also as a celebration of the eschatological banquet that awaits the family of God.

During His ministry, Jesus transformed a simple meal into a habit of sharing the hope of the promise of Heaven. He continually made room for all the wrong characters at His covenant table, much to the shock of his adversaries. Those who held the societal right to be seated at the table were excluded at times, while those of low status were invited freely. While the people He sat with came from a limited number of regions, He would later instruct His disciples to extend the same hospitality throughout the entire world. The Gospel of Luke displays an affinity for understanding the universality and magnitude of the Kingdom of God.

Luke 13:29 prophetically states that "[p]eople will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." Jesus used hospitality to usher in His New Covenant. Further, He asks His followers to adopt His model for hospitality, to keep the celebration going, and to follow in His example, pressing on toward an eternal reality. It is at the dinner table, by way of His hospitality, that the future has broken into the present and the Kingdom is breaking through.

Works Cited

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