

Lord of All or Not at All

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Philippians 2:5-11

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Julio Franco, at age 48, still plays baseball for the New York Mets. He's a credible backup first baseman and a reliable pinch hitter. He'll be 49 when his contract ends next year. His goal is to play until he's 50. Last year, he became the oldest player in Major League Baseball to hit a home run and steal a base.

Former big leaguer Andy Van Slyke speculated several years ago that Julio Franco was still playing major league baseball because he uses steroids. Franco, who is known around the league for being a devout Christian, as well as maintaining a stringent diet and training regimen, resented the accusation. Franco responded to the allegations with these words. "Tell Andy Van Slyke's he's right—I'm on the best juice there is. I'm juiced up every day, and the name of my juice is Jesus. I'm on his power, his wisdom, his understanding. Andy Van Slyke is right, but the thing he didn't mention was what kind of steroids I'm on. Next time you talk to him, tell him the steroid I'm on is Jesus of Nazareth."

I've heard Jesus called lots of names, but I never imagined him as a type of steroid. But I suppose Franco is onto something, if you will pardon the pun. If Jesus is Lord, he might be called a type of performance enhancer. He boosts our productivity!

The central affirmation of the New Testament is "Jesus is Lord." Lord is an English title of respect. Honorable men in British society are still bestowed with the title "Lord," just as respectable women are given the honor "Lady." The designation "House of Lords" derives from this practice of bestowing titles on people.

There are 130 references in Paul's letters to Christ's Lordship. Paul often refers to Jesus by title, "Lord Jesus Christ."

The Hebrew word for Lord conveys authority. Lord in Hebrew, Yahweh, references God's sovereignty and eternity. God, as His name implies, has absolute authority over all that he has made.

Paul writes in Philippians, "God has highly exalted Jesus and given him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:11). The earliest creed in the Christian church is not the Apostles' Creed. The first creed is composed of three simple words, "Jesus is Lord." Paul uses comparable language elsewhere in his letter: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Vienna Presbyterian embraces three essential beliefs, the first of

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which affirms that “Jesus is Lord.” There it is again—Jesus is Lord.

In our Presbyterian constitution, called the Book of Order, the opening paragraph of the preliminary principles declares that God has bestowed on Jesus all rule and authority, all power and dominion. “God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and made Christ Head of the church.... In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the church confesses that he is its hope and that the church, as Christ’s body, is bound to his authority....”

The first question in our constitution asks of every leader ordained in the Presbyterian Church to affirm Jesus as Lord. “Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the church and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”

In the ancient Roman Empire, subjects were required to make a confession each year that Caesar was Lord. Since Caesar provided justice and peace over the civilized world, it must naturally follow that Caesar was Lord. As long as people affirmed Caesar was Lord, they were free to practice any religion they wanted, so long as they proclaimed Caesar as the ultimate Lord over the Roman Empire.

The declaration by early Christians that “Jesus is Lord” challenged Caesar’s Lordship. Christians were thrown to the lions and martyred for refusing to bow to Caesar as Lord. If Jesus is Lord and

Caesar is not, then every Caesar substitute must be dethroned.

Lest you think I am talking simply about ancient history, we fast-forward to 1934, as Hitler was rising to power before WWII. Hitler’s strategy was to use the German Evangelical Church for his political ambitions. He arranged to have Ludwig Muller, a fervent Nazi, selected as head of the German Church. Muller promptly placed two restrictions on clergy: Every clergyman must be politically reliable and accept the superiority of the Aryan race. Those Christians who resisted Hitler’s takeover became known as the Confessing Church. They bound themselves to a creed called the Barmen Declaration of Faith. This creed acknowledges the Lordship of Christ over every area of life. The creed challenges Hitler’s takeover with the words, “We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.” Leaders of this Confessing Church movement, Dietrich Bonhoeffer among them, were martyred for their stand against the Nazis.

So what does all this church history have to do with us today?

Two weeks ago, Elders from our church met with 39 members of our Confirmation Class. The central question asked of each student, it wouldn’t surprise you, is Jesus Christ your Savior and Lord?

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Twenty-eight year's worth of asking this question of high school students and adults influences what I am about to say. I think people understand fairly well the first part of this question. Most people comprehend to some degree that Jesus is my Savior, that Jesus died for my sins and that I am going to heaven on account of what Jesus did for me. But I'm not sure people grasp what it means to profess "Jesus is Lord." I watch how people who say these words live their lives. Many Christians talk as if Jesus is Lord but act as if Jesus is not.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, but do not do what I say?" Hearing doesn't always equate with doing!

Sometimes when we say Jesus is Lord, what we really mean is that Jesus is our religious Lord. He is Lord over religious things, such as going to church or reading my Bible.

If Jesus is only our religious Lord that means there are whole areas of our lives that are outside of Christ's Lordship. Isn't that precisely what the Barmen Declaration railed against? Hitler wanted Christians to compartmentalize their lives. He took no issue with Jesus as a religious Lord; his quarrel was with Jesus as Lord. We reject as false doctrine that there are areas of our lives that do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords.

If Jesus is my only religious Lord, then I can be Lord of the rest of my life. I can live the rest of my life any which way I choose.

In 2006, a New York judge allowed a man to change his name from Jose Luis Espinal to Jesus Christ. Following the decision, Espinal said he was happy and grateful that the judge approved the change. He also said that he was moved to seek the name change about a year prior to the decision, when it dawned on him that, "I am the person that is that name."

We're a little like Jose; we're just more subtle about it. We grab at the title "Lord" every chance we get.

There are little reminders every day that we are not Lord. Sleep reminds us that we are not Lord. Eating reminds us that we are not Lord. Aging reminds us that we are not Lord. There is one Lord and we're not Him!

Jesus is not a religious Lord. Drop the word "religious." Jesus is Lord! Jesus is not Lord by human fiat alone. He is Lord by God's edict. God has placed all things under his Lordship. God has given to Jesus Christ all dominion and glory, power and authority. One day, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ is Lord. If truth be told, you can profess Jesus as Lord now or you will do it later.

Now, please, don't misunderstand me. Jesus is not some sort of egomaniac who requires conformity to his rules. Jesus, as perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, doesn't need our allegiance to be God. But he knows what is best for us. He knows what a mess we make of our lives when we try to be Lord.

St. Augustine said, “Jesus is not valued at all until he is valued above all.”

We make lousy lords but good servants. As the title for this sermon suggests, Jesus is either Lord of all or not at all! I am influenced by something St. Augustine said back in the 5th century: “Jesus is not valued at all until he is valued above all.”

A husband who is faithful to his wife 85 percent of the time is not faithful at all. He cannot claim to value his wife above all other women by practicing fidelity 85 percent of the time. He is either faithful all the time or not at all. The same is true in our relationship to Jesus Christ. He is not valued at all until he is valued above all. If Jesus is Lord over our prayer life but not our financial life, is he really Lord? If he is Lord of Sunday morning but not of Monday through Saturday, is he really Lord? Either he is Lord of all or not at all.

Maybe you are new to this church and the Christian faith. Perhaps you have never made an intentional decision to follow Jesus Christ as Lord with your life. You can make this profession today as I close this sermon in prayer. If this prayer expresses the desire of your hearts, I urge you to make this prayer your own. I will offer a sentence in prayer and invite you to offer it in prayer to God.

You may have made this profession in Christ’s Lordship earlier in your life, maybe as recently as two weeks ago, but you know in your heart there are areas of your life that you haven’t turned over to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It may be a runaway temper, an

unforgiving, critical spirit or an out-of-control anxiety about your life and the things in your life. I invite you, as well, to pray this prayer along with me.

Dear God, I confess Jesus as Savior. I acknowledge that he died for my sins. I receive your gracious offer of forgiveness. I rejoice in your gift of eternal life. I want to follow Jesus as Lord. There are areas of my life that belong to other lords. I have sought to be my own lord. Today I surrender my whole life to Christ as Lord.

