

That power is like the working of his mighty strength,²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church. (Ephesians 1:19b-22)

What Qualifies Jesus to Rule?

Have you been following the pre-election year posturing? Our next general election is more than a year away, but already, all the news guys are trying to figure out who's going to run for president. I'm fascinated by politics, but in almost every election in my life time, I've had the same question about the candidates for both parties: what qualifies these guys to run the country? There are more than three hundred million Americans. How did these guys get to be the people we have to choose from? Even when I like a particular candidate, there's no guarantee that if he wins he's actually going to do a good job. Lots of popular candidates in history were mediocre public servants. It's almost enough to shake your faith in democracy. But then, we have a higher faith than our belief in democracy. We trust in Jesus to take care of us, even when our government fails us. St. Paul tells us this evening that Jesus is the ruler of the world. But does he inspire any more confidence in us than our political leaders do? I hope so – but why? **What qualifies Jesus to rule?** St. Paul answers that question for us today.

I.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he left behind the struggles and humiliation of this life and took up again his natural role as the ruler of the world. **What qualifies Jesus to rule? He has the highest authority.** The expression “seated at the right hand of God” implies authority. To a certain degree, we've preserved the idea in the English expression, somebody's “right hand man.” In a big company or even in the government, somebody's right hand man is the person they depend on to get things done. You could think of Jesus that way. At his Father's right hand, he takes care of all of God's most important assignments: becoming man, dying on the cross and rising again, ruling the world and judging the world. Jesus does all those things.

But in the ancient world, being at a king's right hand implied more than just dependability. It implied real authority. A month or so ago when the media was going crazy over “the royal wedding” I looked at the official website of the British royal family. There's a whole section there dedicated to what they call precedence – the order that royal family members enter an official function. To you and me, that might seem almost silly, but the ancient world would've understood it perfectly. Position equals power. So when God wanted to give a picture of Jesus' authority that their minds could easily grasp, God said that Jesus was seated at his right hand. In the ancient world, the person seated at a king's right hand was extremely powerful – in fact, he often exercised authority in the king's name. Jesus has the authority of God. Now, like all pictures of God in this world, this one has a limit: Jesus is not the second most powerful person in God's kingdom. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equally powerful. But Jesus does honor his Father as his Father. So it is appropriate to think of him at the right hand of the Father.

There, he has authority like no one else ever could. Paul says that the Father “**seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.**” The ancient world was obsessed with titles. In fact, many, many ancient kings claimed to be descended from the gods. Often their titles included some reference to them as gods. But no title on this earth can compare with the title Jesus has. He really is the Son of God. To us Americans, the title of president of the United States is about as high as a person can get. The U.S. president is the leader of the free world. Everything he does and says attracts attention all over the world. But even the greatest president our country could ever produce would be less than Jesus. In fact, a lot less. Paul says that he is far above all rule and authority and every title that can be given. No human ruler even comes close.

Paul tells us that God put all things under his feet. What does that mean? He rules over everything. Nothing in this world happens without his permission. And we're talking about more than nature here. Certainly, Jesus keeps the earth revolving around the sun. He decides when we're going to have a year like this

one when storms have wreaked destruction all across the country and when we're not. But it goes farther than nature. War and peace, good government and bad, so-called "chance encounters" and "accidents" as well as deliberate actions of people and all their consequences fall under Jesus' rule.

But it doesn't always seem that way to us. One of the consequences of sin is that God's rule over this world is hidden. From the time that God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden there has been an illusion that nature is really in control and that chance and luck are real. Unbelievers don't see God in what happens around them. In fact, they view all arguments in favor of God as being nonsense. As long as sin rules here, it will be hard to logically prove that God is really there. When you weigh the good and the bad in our lives, sometimes it doesn't feel like God is really in control. I remember a conversation I had with a Christian once in which I made the statement that Jesus is ruling the world right now. Do you know what he said? "Well, he's not doing a very good job!" That man was a believer!

Many times when I've talked with people who are suffering or facing terrible situations and I reminded them that Jesus is in control and he has a plan for them, they've said things like, "I'm having trouble seeing that right now." When we put enormous amounts of effort into work, into relationships, into homes, and we lose those homes or those jobs or those loved ones, it's hard to believe that God has a loving purpose in what he's doing. When I was in college, the wife of one of our professors was dying. He told us once, "My wife never smoked a cigarette in her life, and she has lung cancer." Now, he never questioned God's love in front of us, but I imagine there were times when he couldn't see that love as his wife slipped away and left him a teenage son to raise alone.

But his faith did not leave him. Why not? Because the gospel is more than just words. It's the power of God. That gospel shows us Jesus our Savior rising from the dead and taking his place at the right hand of God. The gospel says, in Paul's words this morning, "**And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.**" So God's promise to you is that everything in this world is under Jesus' authority. And everything that he does is for the good of the church, for the good of us, his people. That means that everything that happens in this sin-soaked world in some way works for us. All those tornadoes and floods will work for the good of the church. All sickness, all economic hardship, all sorrow works for our good. That professor's wife died confessing her faith in Christ and he took her home. Her husband clung to that promise until he joined her there in heaven.

God never promises that in this life we can see all that he is doing. But he does promise that all that he permits to happen here will serve our good. But what is our good? It's reaching heaven. Nothing is more important than that. Jesus will sacrifice everything else in our lives here to bring us home there. Sometimes, he may even call us to suffer some temporary loss or hurt so that another believer or even a whole group of believers make it home to heaven. We can take comfort in that, because the one who has that authority is none other than the Son of God who loved us so much that he came down here to die for us, to pay for our sins. Who could make better decisions for us than him?

II.

But do his decisions really work out the way he planned them to? Sometimes, we plan and make decisions and they blow up in our faces. Sometimes presidents do their best, but circumstances beyond their control cause disasters. How can we be certain that Jesus is able to make his plans work out for us? **What qualifies Jesus to rule? He has the greatest power.**

It's easy to see sin's power. When I got to my last congregation, the vice-president and his wife took Becky and me out for dinner. He was a very intelligent man. He had been vice-president of an insurance company. He was very active in the congregation and very knowledgeable about the faith. But a couple of years later, he began to show signs of dementia. I watched his frustration grow as he couldn't remember things. He stopped coming to Bible class because he couldn't follow it anymore. At the end, he was in a nursing home, unable to talk, unable to recognize people, under constant supervision so that he wouldn't wander away. It was a relief when he died because it was so hard to see this man decline like that. Most of us have seen illness and age reduce vital, exciting people to husks of themselves.

All that is the power of sin. All disease, all hurt and finally death itself come from sin and we have no trouble seeing how terrible sin's power is. But God's power is hidden in the word and the sacraments. And it may sometimes feel like that power in the gospel is a poor second to that power of sin that we can't miss in our lives every single day.

But St. Paul says, **“That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.”** Jesus beat death. He was stone cold dead in the tomb. But God raised him. No human being could do that. But God did. He undid the damage of crucifixion and scourging. And Jesus lived again. But that wasn't the end of it. Forty days after Jesus rose, he visibly ascended into heaven. When we go to heaven, our bodies will still be here, still lying in the tomb or burned and stored in an urn or even lost. But Jesus' body ascended into heaven. It's there now. Wherever two or three of us come together in his name, Jesus, body and soul, is with us. He's here when we celebrate communion. By a miracle only the Son of God could do, his body and blood have been shared with millions of Christians all over the world, and yet it never diminishes. It is always there.

That power landed Jesus at the right hand of God. That power keeps the earth in its orbit around the sun. That power decides when we get sick and when we're well, when our efforts succeed and when we suffer disappointment. That power holds in check all the wrath of Satan and the ill will of a sinful world and only allows those pains to touch us which will work for our good. That power will raise us from the dead when Jesus returns. That power will transform this sinful world into the paradise that God always wanted us to have. That power will remove all sin from our hearts and perfect and glorify our bodies and keep us alive with Jesus forever.

Today is Ascension Day. We're celebrating what qualifies Jesus to rule over the universe. As the Son of God, he has all authority and all power in heaven and on earth. And as our Savior, he has the wisdom and the love to use that power and authority always for our good. No matter how much this life hurts, that promise is always yours. And his power is built right into that promise. Trust it. Amen.