

A Lesson on Service **John 13:1-17**

¹It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.
– John 13:1

We are at a point of transition in the Gospel of John. In the next few chapters Jesus focus turns from public ministry to a night of in-depth teaching for his disciples. He wants the disciples to be prepared for the events that are soon to follow, namely his death and resurrection. By referencing the Passover Feast, John, both provides a timing for the discourse and picks up on a theme that runs the length of his gospel (2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; cf. 18:28, 39; 19:14). Jesus fulfills the Passover, just as we have seen that he fulfills the Feast of Booths and the Feast of Dedication that were mentioned in chapters 7 and 10 respectively. How does Jesus fulfill the Passover?

²¹ Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. ²³ When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down. – Exodus 12:21-23

In Exodus, the final plague was the killing of the firstborn sons. The angel of death passed over the firstborn sons of Israel only if a lamb was slaughtered and its blood was spread over the doorposts. In his death, Jesus becomes the Passover lamb not for the firstborn sons of ethnic Israel but for “whoever believes in him,” which is spiritual Israel. He was slaughtered on the cross and His blood covers our sins. Death has no power over us. We are preserved unto eternal life. That is how Jesus fulfills the Passover.

Notice also how John describes the believers...“his own who were in the world.” In the next few chapters, John continues to bring this contrast between the “world” and “his own” to the forefront. The point in these chapters is that Jesus' concern is for his own and not the world. Showing his own “the full extent of his love” refers ultimately to Christ’s humble willingness to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). This sacrificial and humble love is captured on a smaller scale in the act of washing the disciples’ feet.

²The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. – John 13:2-5

What are we to make of the interaction between the devil and Judas? Apart from Christ, we know that we are slaves to sin and capable only of choosing sin (Romans 8:1-8). This is Judas’ state. As such, his will is in line with the devil’s will. They are in agreement. The devil need not force Judas to betray Jesus, he need only suggest it as betraying Jesus was a means of obtaining what Judas already wanted. Some of us are living in fear of being overtaken by the devil. Know this, family, if you are pursuing God you have nothing to fear. Remember God's promises. No one can snatch the Good Shepherd's sheep from his hand (John 10:28). Nothing can separate you

from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:31-39).

Now let us turn to the central story of this passage, which is Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Washing feet was a task for servants and slaves. Women and children would also do it at times. It could possibly even be expected that a respected teacher's pupils would wash his feet. But, never under any circumstances would a rabbi wash anyone's feet. Notice also the way Jesus unclothes himself. He not only performs the task but does so dressed as a house slave. Jesus is intentionally assaulting the sensibilities of his disciples. He is shaking their world-view. This is clearly evident by Peter's response.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

Peter's reaction exposes a false humility, which is rooted in pride. Peter is too good to be served. He refuses to let Jesus wash his feet because, in his mind, he knows too well how important Jesus. Apparently, he knows this better than the other disciples whose feet Jesus has already washed. He is also saying that he knows better than Jesus whose feet Jesus should be washing. Some of us are like Peter. We love to serve others, but we refuse to be served ourselves. I am naturally this way but Eric Russ has been trying to break me of this attitude for the past couple of years. We find ways to deflect the offers of help. "I can get it myself" or "It's really not that big of a deal" or even better "I don't want to take resources that could be put to better uses on someone else."

At the root of this thinking is pride. For me, admitting need seems like a failure. I was raised in a family that valued self-sufficiency and autonomy. "If you need something done right, you have to do it yourself" was our unspoken mantra. Family of God, this attitude can have devastating effects. We often take the same approach to struggles with sin that we do to other areas where we have need. We turn a blind eye to it. We do not seek accountability. When our sin outgrows our ability to hide it, we run. We run from the loving rebukes of other believers and straight into the arms of anyone and everyone who will tell us our sin is nothing to worry about or struggle against. Thus, before we know it we're on that wide and easy path that leads to destruction.

Part of Peter's refusal is due to pride. Yet it also flows from ongoing ignorance of Jesus' role as a humble, suffering Messiah. Misunderstanding, by disciples and others, alike is another theme that runs throughout the Gospel of John (2:22; 7:37-39; 12:16; 16:13; 20:9). They have yet to comprehend Jesus' teaching on greatness in the kingdom of (Matthew 20:25-28). As Eric Russ said last week, one of the purposes of the death and resurrection of Christ was to produce faith in the disciples. Seeing a risen Lord made them stop in their tracks and say "Oh...that's what he was talking about. HE IS GOD!!! All those stories and miracles make sense now." But the resurrection hasn't happened yet and thus the epiphany has yet to occur. So we still have misunderstanding.

Do not miss Christ's words to Peter. He actually does not expect him to understand yet, but he does expect him to submit to this washing. Why does he expect him to submit? In the middle of this demonstration of humility he takes the opportunity to convey a spiritual reality, the need for spiritual cleansing. If one does not submit to this washing, administered by Christ, then that person does not have eternal life. Submission to Jesus is an integral part of being his follower. We know that Jesus transitions from the physical to the spiritual because of the words in verse 11. The physical act of washing feet doesn't make someone right with Jesus, because even after washing all the disciples' feet (including Judas Iscariot) he points out that not all of them are (spiritually) clean.

John does not go into detail here about what it means to be cleansed by Jesus in a spiritual sense. But let me offer four thoughts from other parts of Scripture using verse 8 as a reference point. "Unless I wash you," Jesus tells Peter, "you have no part with me."

First, we must recognize our need to be cleansed. Romans 3:23 reminds us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The prophet Isaiah tells us that even "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Apart from God we are all horribly disfigured with sin, unrecognizable from our created state. We are like corpses walking around in various stages of decay. We can try to cover it up. We can probably even fool a lot of people. But, make no mistake you will not fool Jesus (John 13:10).

Second, we must know that the wages of sin is death, which is to say that sin results in eternal separation from our Creator (Romans 6:23). That is why Jesus equates being unclean with having "no part" with him. His teaching builds on the Old Testament teachings on being of clean and unclean. For an Israelite to be unclean meant separation from God's people and an inability to even approach God to worship Him. These laws were a physical reminder of the spiritual reality of sin's effect on our relationships with God and with each other.

Third, Jesus is the only one who can pay for our sin and set us straight with God the Father (Romans 5:8-10). He is the only one who can wash us. Look back at verse 8 one more time. Unless who washes you? Unless Jesus washes you, you have no part with him. Only the cleansed will inherit eternal life. He is the only name under heaven by which men can be saved (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the gate (John 10:9). Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and one gets to the Father except through him (John 14:2).

Fourth, we must submit to the washing. We must not let our pride or our love of this world keep us from humbly and gratefully accepting the free gift that is offered. We must die to the fake and unsatisfying life that this world offers us in order to take hold of that which is life indeed (John 12:24-26). Being cleansed doesn't mean we will stop sinning completely. We will struggle against sin and we need to continually confess that to our Father (1 John 1:9). He in turn will prune away the sinful and unproductive parts of our lives. This sanctification process may well be painful at times, but it is God's means of increasing our fruitfulness (John 15:2).

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶I tell you the

truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

The call to follow Christ is always a call to action. Do not allow yourself to limit this call to the physical act of washing feet. I say this because the text is pointing to something bigger. Jesus almost immediately expands the understanding of the physical act to a spiritual reality. Additionally, in verse 17 Jesus says "now that you know these things". "Things" is plural. If Jesus was simply asking his disciples to do the act of washing feet, the plural form would not make much sense. Finally, we see a similar call to follow Christ's model in other gospels (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27) and it does not refer to washing feet only. If we desire to follow Christ, we cannot sit still in the face of such an exhortation. We must do what he asks.

⁴⁶"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? ⁴⁷I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. ⁴⁸He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. ⁴⁹But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete." Luke 6:46-49

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. James 2:14-19

Christ is calling us to humble service. Some of us are too good to serve one another. Jesus' example, as Creator God taking on the role of human slave, is meant to shake us out of our prideful apathy. Why are we too good to serve? Maybe you can only see your problems and your needs. Or perhaps you've reached a certain age or position in the church or business world and you are too distinguished to be bothered with trivialities. Or could it be that you are lost in a perpetually state of finding where you "fit" in the world. Once you've found your fit, you tell yourself, then and only then will you be able to properly serve. What is your excuse? Are you afraid of your inadequacies being exposed.

Perhaps you and I have never stopped to think of how far Christ stooped down to serve us (Philippians 2:7). Do we truly own the upside-down Kingdom values that unapologetically demand we become the slave of all (Matthew 20:25-28)? Whatever the reason, if we are not serving one another then Jesus is telling us that we are making too much of ourselves and not enough of others. Hear the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians.

¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at

the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. ¹⁴Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. Philippians 2:1-18

Humbling ourselves and serving one another, without complaining or arguing, is our means of shining forth Christ's light to a crooked and depraved generation. It is also a means of strengthening the other members of Christ's body. What an opportunity! Happy are those, Christ tells us, who do these things. Paul rejoices and is glad, in spite of unimaginable suffering, because he gets to serve Christ and his fellow believers. Do you know that joy?

Again this passage is a call to action. Verse 17 makes that clear. There was little or no new information here. But the vast majority of our problems aren't because we lack information. No we sin because we don't take God or his promises seriously. We either half-heartedly respond or don't respond at all. Will you forget about this passage as soon as you leave? Will your only response to today be a lunch-time critique of my sermon? I pray that there would be more, that we would be fertile ground for God's truth and bear much fruit in our community.

Let me close with just a few questions to recap the sermon. I ask that you would take these questions home and refer to them as you read through the passage again. Then meditate on how God might want to work in your life this week.

1. Are you, like Peter, too good to be served? If so, what steps will you take to address this?
2. Are you too good to serve others? If so, what steps will you take to address this? Who will you seek accountability from?
3. Do you take Christ's commands seriously? When he uses his word or another believer to expose lies in your belief system what is your response? Do you get defensive and lash out or do you repent? Does your life change when you hear his truth?
4. Have you let Christ wash you? If not, will you do so today? Will you acknowledge your sin? Will you give up life lived your way and let Christ take over?

Doxology

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