

Learning Servanthood from Jesus

John 13:1-17

There is great significance to what a coach says to his/her team just before the championship game. There is great significance to what a commander says to the troops before going into battle. In the same way, there is great significance to what Jesus told His disciples just before He was arrested and crucified. His words (and actions) carry heightened significance. They emphasize things that are essential for the disciples to understand and experience.

This morning we begin a new sermon series on John 13 through 17. These chapters record what Jesus communicated to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. Chapter 13 records Jesus washing the disciples' feet and dismissing Judas to go betray Him; chapters 14 through 17 record what has come to be known as "the farewell discourse."

Today we consider John 13:1–17, the passage that describes Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Jesus draws out the significance of washing the disciples' feet in two complementary ways. First. . .

Washing the Disciples' Feet: a Parable of the Cleansing Jesus Offers (13:1-11)

One of the striking things that John does at the beginning of this passage is tell us what Jesus knows. Knowing what Jesus knows makes what He says and does all the more striking.

1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

The Feast of the Passover commemorated God delivering the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. At the original "passover" each family placed the blood of a lamb over the doorpost of their house so that the firstborn son would be spared when the Angel of the Lord "passed over." The gospel of John develops the theme of the Passover, emphasizing that Jesus Himself would be the final Passover lamb - "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29).

John tells us that Jesus knew that "His hour had come." Jesus' "hour" is the time when He would be sacrificed for the sins of the people. In the previous three years, Jesus avoided various situations that would have led to His death (e.g., Luke 4:28-30 - the people in Jesus' hometown synagogue tried to throw Him off a cliff). But knowing that His hour had come - the time when He would "depart out of this world" and return "to the Father" - Jesus fulfilled one last aspect of His calling.

"Having loved His own who were in the world" (i.e., His disciples), "He loved them to the end." This expression can either mean that Jesus loved them to "the end of His life" (which was certainly true) or that He loved them to the "fullest extent" (which was

also true). Perhaps John expects us to understand both meanings (as with Lattke; see Carson, p. 461). The following few verses explain how Jesus loved His disciples to the fullest extent, to the end of His life (ultimately a reference to His crucifixion).

Verse 2 gives us a glimpse into what was happening in the unseen spiritual world:

2 During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, *the son of Simon*, to betray Him,

This doesn't imply that Judas was an innocent victim or that Satan manipulated him against his will. It will become clear that Satan found in Judas a willing accomplice. Together they conspired to betray Jesus into the hands of the authorities. Here we learn that at the supper being described, betrayal was already in Judas' heart (and Jesus knew it - see verses 10 and 11).

In verse 3 we learn other things that Jesus "knew."

3 *Jesus*, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, 4 got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. 5 Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

Jesus acted with the knowledge that God had put all things under His power ("into His hands"); in other words He wasn't helpless and powerless. Jesus acted with the knowledge that He was returning to God; after the cross He would return to the glory He had before the incarnation. The fact that Jesus knew these things makes His humility all the more striking.

Knowing that He had come to this critical moment in all of history, Jesus got up from supper, took off his outer garment, took a towel, poured water in a basin, and began washing the disciples' feet. By the way he writes, John is screaming that what Jesus is doing isn't peripheral or nonessential to His mission. He wants us to see that Jesus is doing is critical to His mission.

As Peter's reaction will make clear, Jesus violated the accepted social norms of His day by washing the disciples' feet. Washing people's feet was a menial task done by servants. A person with a higher status never washed the feet of someone with a lower status. But here the "Lord and Teacher" (v. 14) washed the feet of His disciples. This is what happened when Jesus came to wash Peter's feet.

6 So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter."

Peter's question was really a protest: "Are *you* going to wash *my* feet?" (see Carson, p. 463). Jesus basically tells Peter that even though he didn't understand right then why Jesus would do this, one day he would. The disciples would understand this foot washing (and many other things) only **after** the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus expected Peter to submit to this foot washing by faith; it should have been enough to be told that he'd one day understand. But Peter continued to get it wrong. . . repeatedly.

8 Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Jesus' comment suggests that washing the disciples' feet signified something much deeper than removing the dirt from Peter's skin. Jesus isn't merely saying that unless Peter allowed Him to wash his feet that he would be fired as a disciple. Rather, as the "Lamb of God" Jesus is telling Peter, "Unless I wash away your sins, you really don't belong to Me." A relationship with Jesus is based solely on what **He** does for **us** (not on what we do for Him). A Christian is someone who has been washed/cleansed from sin by Jesus. In response, Peter goes too far the other direction:

9 Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, *then wash* not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." 10 Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all *of you*."

Jesus is drawing an analogy between being physically clean and being spiritually clean. Let's say that you take a bath, get dressed, and walk down a dusty street in sandals to your friend's house. You probably wouldn't say, "Before we have supper, I think I'll go take a bath" No, you're already clean; you would only need to wash your feet. In the same way, if you trust in Jesus to take away your sin, you are "completely clean." You aren't 50 or 75% clean; you are completely clean. But there will be times when you sin - when your feet get dirty. In that case you only need Jesus to wash your feet; you need a fresh experience of cleansing from sin. In an absolute sense, you are "completely clean," but in a more limited sense, you experience a fresh cleansing.

In verse 11 John clarifies why Jesus mentioned (v. 10) that "not all of you" are clean:

11 For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."

Jesus knew that Judas didn't and wouldn't believe (and therefore wasn't "clean"); Judas was in a different category than the other 11 disciples. We'll see in a couple of weeks that Jesus' prediction of Judas' betrayal would eventually be one more confirmation for the disciples that He is the Christ (13:19).

The application at this point is to realize that Jesus says the same two things to us that He said to Peter. First, Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Each of us needs to come to the place of acknowledging, "I can't clean myself up. I

can't get rid of my sin. Therefore, I trust that Jesus' death on the cross paid for my sin." That's how you become completely clean.

Those who have been "washed" by Jesus in this way also need to hear Him say: "I will wash your feet when they get dirty." As we all know, even after we belong to Jesus, we will sin - sometimes in spectacular ways. When we do, the fact remains that Jesus is the only One who can cleanse us from our sin. Like Peter some of us say, in effect, "Never, Lord, will You wash my feet." Sometimes I feel like I should have long ago outgrown the need for Jesus to rescue me and forgive me of my sin. I should be more of a peer than a helpless, sinful disciple. But the fact remains that we can't work it off; we can't pay it off; we can't make a deal with God. Like Peter, we need Jesus to wash our feet.

Think of a couple of recent sins you've committed (don't make me list the most likely ones. . .). Instead of walking around with dirty feet, you can simply admit to God, "I've sinned."

So far, in this passage, Jesus washing the disciples' feet has underlined the fact that Jesus can cleanse you completely, and when you sin Jesus can (and will) give you a fresh experience of cleansing. But in verses 12 through 17 Jesus draws out another implication that takes us a different direction: Jesus' action serves as an example for His disciples to follow.

Washing the Disciples' Feet: an Example to Follow (13:12-17)

We see this pattern throughout the New Testament: Jesus suffering paid for our sin, but it was also an example for us to emulate (1 Peter 2); Jesus' crucifixion uniquely paid for sin, but it was also a challenge to "take up the cross and die daily" (Luke 9:23). In the same way, Jesus washing the disciples feet pointed both to His unique ability to cleanse AND to their need to wash one another's feet.

12 So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined *at the table* again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?
13 "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. 14 "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

Remember that a disciple is an apprentice, someone who is learning from a master/teacher how to think and live. Jesus' logic is hard to refute. If He - the Lord and Teacher - washed their feet, then they - as disciples - should wash one another's feet. A disciple can't pick and choose which aspects of the master's life s/he wants to emulate. Verse 16 puts all of this into perspective:

16 "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.

The implication is that if I say to you, “I won’t serve you,” I am really saying, “I think I’m better than Jesus. . . radical servanthood was fine for Him but not for me!” We’re not greater than our “master”; we’re not greater than the One who “sent” us. Jesus’ final comment in verse 17 is critical.

17 “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

The person who actually **does** these things is “blessed.” You don’t experience God’s fullest blessing/favor by talking about servanthood or by intending to be a servant; you are blessed if you actually get up from the table, take off your outer garment, put a towel around your waist, pour water in a basin, and begin washing the feet of those around you. Jesus is claiming that a life of servanthood is a life of blessing.

I’d encourage you to wrestle with whether or not you really believe this claim. You might have assumed that the best life is one in which you set things up so that everybody else serves you. If you don’t believe that a lifestyle of servanthood is a life of blessing, you probably won’t seek out ways to serve those around you. You may serve people out of obligation and then resent it; or you may serve people for the applause of others. But Jesus is saying that we’ll experience God’s favor (in undefined ways) if we actually serve others. We need to get to the place where we **love** to serve others, where if we could choose any lifestyle we want we’d choose to serve.

[BTW, it’s highly unlikely that Jesus expected all disciples in every culture and generation to literally wash each others’ feet. There’s nothing wrong with having actual foot-washing services; I’ve had some meaningful experiences involving foot washings - it’s a rather humbling experience.]

So how do we begin to “do these things”? Following Jesus’ example, I’d encourage you to begin noticing and serving those closest to you - those with whom you live, those in your workplace, those in your life group, your friends. Instead of sitting back and waiting to be asked to help out in some way, take the initiative and serve.

Jesus’ example especially encourages us to serve those who have a “lower rank” (in terms of status or power or influence). The tendency is to serve only those whom we deem worthy or deserving of our efforts. We resist the idea of serving (or encouraging or being nice to) those who have mistreated us or offended us in some way. All of our resistance is shattered by the fact that Jesus knowingly washed the feet of the man who would betray Him, Judas. Jesus loved and served His enemy. If Jesus is your Lord and Teacher, you are left with no good excuses.

Who is God bringing to your mind right now? How might He want you to serve that person? By washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus isn’t merely saying to us, “I’d like you to please try and be a little nicer to other Christians.” He is saying, “A life of sacrificial servanthood - even if it means humbling yourself lower than you dreamed possible - is a life of blessing.”