

SERVE HUMBLY

John 13:12-20, 33-38

There are many people around who would like to be in the position of having someone take care of their every wish, to see to it they want for nothing, and to cater to their whims. You don't find many who are seeking ways to look after the needs of others with no consideration for their own needs. If there were job openings for king and slave, most people would want to apply for the job of king and hardly anybody would sign up to be a slave.

We know there are not literally job openings for king and slave; however, there are situations we encounter every day where we make the choice of waiting for someone to serve us or for us to serve others. We either let someone else do the dirty work or we jump in there and do it ourselves. We choose either to be served or to serve. In the last few hours of the earthly ministry of Jesus, He taught about this choice. Of all the things He could have told them, He must have considered this to be very important. The lessons learned about serving are essentials of living the Christian life. The setting Jesus used was the upper room where Jesus and His disciples gathered to eat the Passover meal.

It was on this occasion that Jesus introduced the New Covenant and the Lord's Supper. Before these significant events took place, Jesus turned to the practical realities of how we relate to others. There were several significant events leading up to this situation. The disciples sensed something important was about to happen. Jesus had been talking about a new kingdom and the disciples were trying to get into position for the best jobs in the Kingdom. They knew Jesus was going to be king, however, they wanted to be assistant king. You recall that the mother of James and John had requested that her sons sit, one on the right and the other on the left of Jesus. This request caused jealousy among the others and they were having discussions among themselves as to who would have the best positions. Jesus had told them they were acting like a bunch of Gentiles and that the greatest was to be the servant of all. That message just didn't get through to them. As they came to eat the Passover meal, they were still bickering. This set the stage for what then happened.

Sometimes words fail to convey the message that is needed. Though Jesus had taught the disciples about greatness and servanthood, they were still arguing among themselves. Jesus recognized the problem and set out to do something to drive His message home. He demonstrated "servanthood" to them as He went about washing their feet and in doing so He made a lasting impression on them. John pointed out Jesus did what He did knowing He came from God and was returning to God. You could argue that this knowledge was the very thing that allowed Him to do the lowly task of washing the feet of His followers. Most of us want to avoid the menial tasks in life because we are concerned with what someone else might think. If you already know who you are and have a good concept of your worth before God, then it makes no difference what anyone else thinks.

Follow Christ's Example – 13:12-15

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." John 13:12-15 (NASB95)

Humility is a requirement for pleasing God. The opposite of humility is pride and it is pride that keeps us from doing the lowly tasks (the menial jobs) sometimes required to help others. Jesus set the example and if we recognize Him as Lord and Master, we will follow His example.

According to Matthew Henry, “many interpreters consider Christ’s washing his disciples’ feet as a representation of his whole undertaking. He knew that he was equal with God, and all things were his; and yet he rose from his table in glory, laid aside his robes of light, girded himself with our nature, took upon him the form of a servant, came not to be ministered to, but to minister, poured out his blood, poured out his soul unto death, and thereby prepared a laver to wash us from our sins (Rev 1:5).” (See also, Phil 2:5-8.)

It is helpful to consider what Jesus did in the context of the culture of the time. In an “upper class” household of that day and time, whose job was it to wash the feet of people coming into a home? That menial job belonged to the lowliest ranked person of those who served the family. Having a slave or what the Greeks referred to as a “doulos” was not uncommon since people would take such jobs of working for food and shelter because of dire economic conditions in which they would find themselves. Others who had more ability and bargaining power might agree to work for a family in a more “managerial” role (stewards) of taking care of the functioning of the household, educating the children and directing the work of the slave class workers.

What is the lesson of that teachable moment that had just occurred? In that culture and time, humility was considered to be a sign of weakness. The actions Jesus took in taking off his outer garment and wrapping a towel around His waist (the way a slave would be dressed) was despised by both the Jews and the Gentiles. According to Warren Wiersbe, the task of washing the feet of guests was not carried out even by Jewish servants but was done by Gentile slaves. In other words, what Jesus did was scandalous and certainly revolutionary.

In addition, consider the background controversy going on among the disciples – who is the greatest among them and who would be the leader when Jesus moves on to set up His kingdom? Jesus was clearly their “leader” at that time (He was and is Lord), and (according to Jesus) a key qualification for being the leader is the ability to take on the role of the lowliest worker. Then He said “follow My example.”

How do we respond to such a command that we “wash one another’s feet?” Some groups have turned that command into a religious ritual. You probably have heard of “foot-washing” Baptists. Many (or even most in today’s Christian community) would conclude that those people are missing the point of what Jesus was teaching. The lesson that is understood by most is that we, as those who follow the example of Christ, should minister to the needs of others regardless of how lowly the task might be.

Can we think of other things that Christ told us to do that we have “institutionalized” and created a religious ritual to replace the reality of what we need to be accomplishing? In various churches we may find that we observe certain sacraments or ordinances in a “religious” way. Two things come to mind with which most Christians have some familiarity: Communion and Baptism. We have certainly institutionalized and ritualized these practices; however, the question we need to address is, are we walking in the reality of what these ordinances represent?

For example, regarding the Lord’s Supper, Paul said “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show the Lord’s death until He returns.” Jesus told His disciple “this is my body which is broken for you” and “this is my blood which is shed for you.” We are to eat and drink of the body and blood of Christ. The reality is that Christ is to be in us and that we are to “show” evidence by our very lives what His death accomplished in taking our sin upon Himself so that we become the righteousness of God in Christ. This does not mean that we neglect the ritual and the symbolism of it, but it does mean that we must embrace the reality of what it shows so that the reality and the ritual agree.

In the same way, we must not substitute the ritual of baptism for the reality of becoming a

true disciple of Christ by being immersed in the nature and character of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We may be in danger of thinking that the Great Commission tells us to go and baptize, it really says that we are to go and make disciples.

Remember Who Sent You – 13:16-20

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. ¹⁷“If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸“I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but *it is* that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘HE WHO EATS MY BREAD HAS LIFTED UP HIS HEEL AGAINST ME.’ ¹⁹“From now on I am telling you before *it* comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*. ²⁰“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” John 13:16-20 (NASB95)

If we think we are too good or too important to do something menial like washing someone's feet, then we are guilty of thinking we are greater than Jesus. He said the slave is not greater than his lord. We all know this is a general truth; however, just knowing it is not enough. We need to be about practicing the truth in the everyday situations in which we find ourselves. Doing or taking action is where we find the blessings of obedience that go beyond the benefits of simply knowing the truth.

The second part of verse 16 was specifically directed to His disciples there with Him who would be called Apostles (literally those who are sent). These men would be held in high esteem by the church and Jesus knew there was danger in them allowing the positions of leadership in which they would find themselves to be a hindrance to humility.

All significant things that happened in the life of Christ were foretold in the scriptures. Many of these prophecies were situations that happened to others such as David. The particular reference that Jesus mentioned here (verse 18) was related to a situation that David encountered in being betrayed by Ahithophel who supported Absalom in his revolt against David. We know from the hindsight we have that Jesus was referring to what Judas Iscariot had already set in motion to betray Jesus to the Jewish leaders.

God has told us many things that have yet to come to pass. If we are knowledgeable of the word of God, then the unfolding of events around us such as rejection of Godly influence in our culture and the persecution that happens to Christians who openly take a stand for the principles of the Kingdom of God will strengthen our faith and draws us closer to God.

We are indeed ambassadors for Christ and, as such, bear a great responsibility. (It is not immediate obvious why this statement was made in the midst of the discourse regarding the coming betrayal by Judas. Perhaps it is a warning to all who bear the name of Christ, who call themselves Christian, to be on guard that we not betray Him by inappropriate words and actions.)

After this, Judas went out to complete the betrayal of Jesus. Jesus began His interaction with the disciples that evening by carrying out the role and duties of a slave. It is no coincidence that the amount of money that Judas received to betray Christ was the going price for that of a slave.

Serve in Love – 13:33-35

³³“Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:33-35 (NASB95)

We cannot, in our own strength and by our own merit, reach the heaven of God. Jesus had developed a relationship with His disciples and they wanted to be in His presence. Now He was creating a desire in their hearts to follow Him where He was going. A little later in His discourse (John 14:3), Jesus would tell them, though they cannot come to where He is going, He

would come again and receive them unto Himself so that they would be where He is. The NIV translation adds the idea of being “taken away” that supports the idea of this being the rapture of the church. An alternate legitimate translation would be that they would be “received along side of” as in the coming of the Holy Spirit Who is described as the “paraklete” or “one who comes along side of.”

After Judas left to betray Jesus, the Lord gave a new commandment to the remaining disciples. On several occasions people would quiz Jesus about the Old Testament scriptures. They would ask things such as, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus summarized the Law and the Prophets with just two commandments: 1. Love God with your total being, and 2. Love your neighbor as yourself. These tell us the targets and the extent of love; however, there may be variations in the quality of love. It was in this upper room that Jesus defined the quality of love that He meant. He said, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This is a self-sacrificing kind of love. It is love that goes the second mile and turns the other cheek and it is the kind of love that even washes dirty feet. It's the kind of love that doesn't find fault and that doesn't brag, it looks out for others and does not understand the idea of “looking out for number one.” It's the kind of love we must show if we are to win the world to Jesus.

The written law or Ten Commandments were cast mainly in terms of what we should avoid doing. Some, such as “remember the Sabbath” and “honor your father and mother” were stated positively. The rest of the written code was more in line with “do no harm.” This gives an idea of a passive response regarding our responsibility. As Jesus interacted with the Jews who were testing His orthodoxy, He referred to the “spirit of the law” which implies that we are to be proactive in our interactions with both God and man.

Resist Boasting – 13:36-38

³⁶Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered, “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.” ³⁷Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You.” ³⁸Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times. John 13:36-38 (NASB95)

Did Peter hear the “new commandment?” Probably not! He was still thinking about Jesus going away to some physical place here on earth and wondering where it was He was going. Jesus had just told them the route to “where He was going.” That route is the way of self-sacrificing love. Jesus is the personification of godly love; therefore, He is the way (see also John 14:6).

Peter could not follow Jesus at that time since “the way” had not been developed in him. This is not something we can do in human strength. It is only by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in us that we are able to “work out” the love of God in our lives that He has put into our hearts at our conversion. The best Peter’s human resolve could manifest was demonstrated when he denied Christ. If we find ourselves constantly failing to follow Jesus and to deny self rather than deny Christ it is likely that we are hindering the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives by refusing to follow where He is leading.

It is worth noting comments on this subject by Warren Wiersbe in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. “We today, just like the disciples that night, desperately need this lesson on humility. The church is filled with a worldly spirit of competition and criticism as believers vie with one another to see who is the greatest. We are growing in knowledge, but not in grace (see 2 Peter 3:18). “Humility is the only soil in which the graces root,” wrote Andrew Murray. “The lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure.”