

John 13

The Example of Jesus as the Humble Servant

Imagine you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and a janitor calls you, complaining that one of the bathrooms is disgusting; he demands that you come and unclog the toilet and clean up the mess. How would you respond? No doubt you would be taken aback, deeply offended at his disrespect (and would probably fire the guy). Why? Because his expectation is completely inappropriate and out of place: you're the boss, he's the low-level employee.

But now imagine the roles are reversed. Imagine you're an entry-level, minimum-wage employee at a massive company, and the million-dollar-salaried CEO walks over to your car, gets down on the ground even though he's wearing a three-piece suit, and changes your flat tire in a cold November rain. How would you respond then? *{Pause}* Or, imagine you're a menial servant in a palace, and the King himself knocks on your door, bringing you food, and stoops down to scrub your floors before grabbing your dirty laundry. How would you respond?

We would all be awe-struck if such a thing happened; we might not believe it, and would probably be waiting for the other shoe to drop, looking for the catch, because such a thing just doesn't happen. We often think too highly of ourselves and want to get what we think we deserve, to be served, rather than to serve others. We expect others to demand the same. We aren't used to superiors serving their inferiors. That's not how the world works.

And yet it *is* how the gospel works. It's how the Kingdom of God works. We see a profound picture of this here in our passage this morning, in John 13, where Jesus - the Teacher, the Messiah, the Promised King, the Lord and Savior of the World - stoops down to wash the feet of His disciples, even of the one who will betray Him, even of the one who will doubt and deny Him, pointing forward to His even greater act of humble, sacrificial love on the cross. Christ does the completely unexpected and unthinkable. And then calls us, as His followers and disciples, to follow in His example by humbly serving and loving one another.

That's what we see in this chapter: Just as Christ humbly, sacrificially served us, even by dying on the cross to cleanse us from our sins, so we must follow His example and humbly love and serve one another if we would be known as His followers. First, we see Christ's example...

I. Jesus sets the example by humbly, lovingly serving His disciples (1-11)

We see this in verses 1-11. The very night before Jesus would be crucified, He gathered together with his closest friends and disciples - to celebrate the Passover. We think of days beginning early in the morning and ending late at night; but for the ancient Jewish understanding, a new day began in the evening; so Thursday evening and Friday morning would be the same day. So that means they gathered that Thursday evening to celebrate the Passover together, as we see in v.1: "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." His hour of death, resurrection, and glorification has come; Christ is about to die on the cross as the true Passover Lamb, to deliver His people from Sin, Satan, and Death!

But His disciples didn't understand all this - not yet. So the night before, in what is known as Jesus's "Farewell Discourse," Jesus begins to explain the significance of what is about to take place. He begins to do so by doing a shocking, counter-intuitive act: He humbly washes his disciples feet, a task that usually fell to lowly servants. V.1 sets the stage for us, as we've seen. Then, in vv.2-3, we're told that one of those Twelve disciples, Judas Iscariot, already had the demonic scheme of the Devil planted firmly in his heart to betray Jesus - and Jesus was well aware of it. And yet, in vv.4-5, Jesus "rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him"

In order to really grasp what's going on here, we need to remember that this took place in a very different time and culture. We're used to sitting in chairs at a table to eat. They didn't do that. Jesus and his disciples would have all been reclining on the floor, perhaps leaning on cushions, with their heads and arms closest to the table, and their legs and feet extending out from it. That's why v.23 says one of the disciples was reclining by Jesus's side and leans back against him to talk to him. So that's the setup. But then Jesus, the literal Man of the Hour, the God-Man, rises up from the table and takes off his robe, so that He now looks like a servant, a slave. And then he sets about the menial, dirty work of a lowly servant or slave: *washing their feet*. I think we all usually regard feet as stinky and dirty. All we need for a reminder of this is to think of smelling a hard working man's boots and socks after he's been sweating in them all day; or to look at your kids' feet after they've been playing outside barefoot. But now imagine how it would be if we didn't have daily showers or indoor plumbing and modern soap, or AC; if we didn't wear socks, or even closed-toes shoes, but often went about in sandals or even barefoot; if

we didn't have paved roads or sidewalks but only dirt paths, and if we didn't have cars but walked everywhere, all day, through dirty, dusty streets full of mud and trash and animal waste. That's how it was back then, and their feet were nasty and rank. Washing feet was physically dirty, smelly, gross work. But it also carried social stigma; it was a demeaning task, reserved for the lowest of servants. And this is exactly the task that Jesus, the God-Man, our Creator, King, Lord, and Savior, set about doing for His disciples! He humbly served them.

Imagine the shock they must have felt. Imagine how uncomfortable and embarrassing it must have been for the disciples. We see this in Peter's response to Jesus, in vv.6-11, where He refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. He rightly recognizes that this work is far beneath Jesus; he should be washing Jesus's feet, not the other way around. But Jesus answers, "If I do not wash you, you have no share in me" (v.8). Peter then asks Jesus to wash his hands and head as well, essentially saying, if that's the case, then wash all of me! But Jesus responds, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you" (v.10). They don't get what he's saying, not yet; but Jesus tells them, in v.7, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward, you will understand."

After Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, this all makes sense and takes on greater significance. Jesus's entire point here is not that Jesus wants them to have clean feet; it's to point to His cross. The point is, He wants them to have clean hearts, cleansed from sin! Jesus washing their feet points to His entire life as the humble, suffering Servant that Isaiah prophesied would come. Jesus is the Son of God, the Creator of the World! And yet He left the luxury and comfort and glory of Heaven to come down to earth, being born a human being, along with all the discomfort and humility and pain and sorrow and suffering that that brings. And He's about to bring it all to a head. This night, He humbly washes their feet; later that night, He will face the humiliation and suffering of betrayal and an unjust trial; the very next day He would humbly carry His own cross, like a lamb being led to the slaughter. As Phil. 2:6-8 says, Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Why would Jesus do this? Because of His love for us. Because of His humble, sacrificial, servant-hearted love for those who are sinners. Christ, the Lamb of God, died on the cross in

order to make atonement for our sin, paying the penalty our sins deserve, to ransom and redeem us! Every single one of us is a dirty, rotten sinner; your feet might be clean, your clothes unsoiled, you might look and smell great - but what about your soul? What about on the inside? Every single one of us is a sinner. Every single one of us has sinned against God! In fact, even our best works, our greatest good deeds, are soiled and stained by our sinful intentions and thoughts, making our best look and smell like dirty, filthy rags in the sight of God. Our hearts and souls reek with the filthy stains of sin. And try as you might, you can never clean yourself up; we can never wash away our sins. So what can wash away our sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! Just like Jesus humbly washed the disciples feet, so He humbly died on the cross, so that as His blood was spilled as a sacrifice, we can be cleansed and washed clean by His blood through faith in Him! The only way to be forgiven, cleansed, and saved is for Jesus to wash us by His blood, making us white as snow. This alone is our hope: that our sins are washed away by Christ, who loved us so much that He Humbly died for us, to serve and save us!

That's the point of Jesus washing feet! See how much Jesus loves you, that He, our great master, the perfect teacher, the highest Lord, the King of Kings, the very God who made you, has stooped down, humbling himself in the dust, even taking on the form and role of a lowly servant, in order to *serve you* - washing your feet - by *saving you*, sacrificially suffering and dying in your place on the cross! See the incredible love and mercy of our humble savior! Open your arms wide and let Jesus serve you and save you; let Him wash you clean by His blood by repenting and believing in Him alone. If your faith is in Christ, then you have been washed completely clean! And that means we, like the Twelve, are also His disciples, called to follow His example.

Which is exactly what we see in point 2...

II. Jesus expects us to follow His example by humbly serving and loving one another as His disciples (vv.12-20, 31-35)

In vv.12-20, Jesus calls His disciples to follow His example, by humbly serving one another (the metaphorical significance of washing feet, not the literal act itself). In v.12, after finishing up the foot washing, putting his robes back on, and reclining back at the table, he asks, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" He goes on to explain a bit of the significance of what he's just done in vv.13-14: "You call me Teacher and lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly,

I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

In other words, Jesus is saying that He just washed their feet to set an example for His disciples to follow. The word “disciple” means someone who is following, learning from, and imitating their teacher. Christ’s disciples are those who believe in and follow Him - learning from Him, becoming like Him. And this includes following His example of humble, sacrificial, servant-hearted love. A servant is not greater than his master. If the master loves and serves His servants, than how much more so should the servants love and serve one another? If the Teacher does so, than so should the students, his disciples. If Christ so loves His followers, His disciples, that He humbly serves them by washing their feet, then how much more so should we, as Christians, those who believe and follow Christ as His disciples, love and humbly serve one another? Christ commands us and expects us to follow in His example of washing one another’s feet - not literally, but figuratively. He isn’t setting this up as some kind of ordinance or ritual we’re supposed to repeat. No, it’s a symbolic representation of how we are to live and treat one another as Christians. Jesus washing their feet pointed to Him washing away our sins by His blood on the cross. We who have been washed are to sacrificially love and serve one another.

We see this even more explicitly and clearly in vv.31-35. After Judas leaves to carry out this betrayal, in vv.21-30 (which we’ll come back to in a little bit), Jesus begins to speak even more plainly to His disciples, giving clear instruction for how Christians are to live after Christ is gone, which He’ll continue to do for the next few chapters. He says, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (v.31), speaking of what’s about to take place. He then tells them, in v.33, that He is going to leave them and go where they can’t follow, speaking of His upcoming death, resurrection, and ascension. He then gives a “new commandment” for how His disciples - for how all Christians - are to live after Jesus is no longer on earth; the time period we live in, today. We see this new commandment in v.34: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved, you also are to love one another.” Just as God gave Israel the Law after the first Passover, so Christ gives His New Covenant people a new Law to follow after the last Passover: the Law of Christ, the Law of Love.

We are to follow Jesus and be like Him, following His example of humble, sacrificial, servant-hearted love, most fully displayed in the cross. This is true of our whole lives, and should shape the way we treat everybody. But Jesus is saying here this *especially* transforms the way we

relate to one another, as fellow Christians. We are to love and humbly serve *one another*; fellow Christians, *in the very same way Christ loved us* - not necessarily by literally washing feet or literally dying, by doing so in a figurative sense. And note that this isn't optional: it is expected of all Christians, even serving to *identify* true Christians. We see this in v.35: "By this *all people* will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love for fellow Christians is an ID card, a badge that shows that we are Christians. The implication is that if it isn't there, then we can't be identified as true Christians. We will be recognized as Christians, as those who follow Christ, by following in His example of humbly loving and serving one another.

First off, we need to notice that this implies we actually have to spend time with each other. If we don't go to church, if we don't belong to a church family, how can we claim to love Christ's church like He does? The very act of showing up to church is an act of humble love and service to our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are always reasons to *not* go to church. When we make it a priority to go to church, so long as we are physically able, then we are putting our claim to love into action. We are showing that we love Christ and our fellow Christians more than sleeping in, or going fishing, or any of the other things we could be doing instead. And let me also say that even serving the community doesn't count as a substitute for church; yes, we should love and serve our community, but not at the expense of loving and serving one another, fellow Christians. Christ says this should be an even higher priority for us. This requires that we show up, know each other, spend time and worship together. On the Lord's day, and also we gather together throughout the week. All of these are opportunities to love and encourage one another, and provide even more opportunities for serving and meeting needs.

Secondly, as we must "wash each other's feet" by putting one another first, even above our own interests, never considering ourselves too good to serve. Think about those in your church family. Is there anyone you feel like you're better than? Someone that you feel like is needy? Then you should go and find a way to serve that person. Humbly pray to the Lord, repent of your pride, and seek to serve that person, as a way to follow in the example of Christ, who, being so much better than you, loved you so much that He humbled Himself to the dust to joyfully serve and save you. If you aren't already involved in serving the church, I encourage you to look for ways to do so. Ask a pastor or deacon for ways you could plug in and serve. Ask what needs you can meet. There are a million opportunities that arise for serving: Bringing meals to fellow Christians in need; preparing for potlucks, cleaning tables and sweeping floors and

stacking chairs; giving rides to those who need them; visiting shut-ins; giving a helping hand with car or house repairs; discipling a fellow Christian who's younger in the faith, and so on.

And if there's a ministry need that you feel like is beneath you? A need that isn't being filled, that you know you could do, and yet you just don't *want* to do it, because you feel like it's beneath you and not the "best use" of your gifts and talents? Then that might be *exactly* the kind of thing God wants you to do. Think you're too good to clean toilets and scrub floors? Then maybe you sign up to be on the church cleaning rotation. Feel like watching and teaching children is beneath your skillset or a distraction from you being "fed"? Then maybe you should volunteer to help serve in the nursery, or offer to babysit for a family in the church throughout the week. That's not a distraction from you learning and growing and being fed spiritually; humbly serving is a fantastic opportunity to put Christlike love into practice and serve the Church, His disciples, and even our little ones? What better opportunity to practice Christlike humility and service than scrubbing toilets and changing smelly diapers?

But let me also add that I am *so thankful* for the many examples of humble, loving service that I've seen on display among you all in our church family, often in ways that are behind the scenes and go unnoticed. The many hands who clean the building and cut grass; the ones who have anonymously taken the initiative to fix what's broken or do what needs to be done; those who have dropped everything to meet needs, like moving furniture for someone who can't; or like coming to help fix a sump pump problem late at night. I praise God for the Christlike love for one another that I see here among us! So may we all be encouraged to humbly love and serve one another all the more, to give ourselves over to loving Christ and being like Him by loving His disciples, His people, His body and bride - His church. When we do so, then the whole world will know that we are Christians and belong to Christ, by loving one another the way Christ loves us.

But you may be thinking just how hard it can be to love and serve at times, even fellow Christians. Which is exactly what we see addressed in our next point...

III. Jesus even served those who would betray and deny Him (21-30, 36-38)

We've seen little side comments all throughout the chapter so far that one of the disciples whom Jesus humbly serves will betray him - namely, Judas Iscariot. It's first mentioned in v.2, that Judas is under the influence of the Devil. Jesus mentions again in v.11 that He knows Judas will betray Him, that Judas is not actually washed clean or saved; that again in vv.18-20, that

Jesus is aware that Judas will reject and betray him, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Scripture. And Judas does so that very night: in vv.21-30, after Jesus gives him a morsel of bread, Satan enters Judas (in v.27), and Judas leaves, going to turn Jesus over to the authorities and betray him, leading to Jesus's unjust trial, suffering, and crucifixion. The other disciples don't know it yet - but Jesus clearly does. But why is so much attention given to Judas's betrayal here? And why does John emphasize, over and over again, that Jesus washed the disciples' feet *before* Judas left, knowingly serving even the traitor? He could have waited till after he left, just a short time later; so why didn't he? I think because there's 4 important points to take away from this:

First, to increase our faith God's sovereignty over Judas's betrayal of Christ. Jesus *knew* that Jesus was going to betray Him, even when He washed His feet and fed. This was not a surprise; it was part of God's plan all along. Jesus willingly let Judas betray Him, in order that He could die on the cross for our sins. God was sovereign even over the most heinous, evil act ever committed, by both Satan and humanity, to bring about the greatest imaginable act of love, goodness and grace. Jesus emphasizes this, before it takes place, so that we may believe in Him all the more, as He says in v.19.

Secondly, it highlights for us that Jesus washed Judas's feet and humbly served him *even though He knew he was about to betray Him!* Christ humbly, lovingly served even his enemies, even the one who would betray Him, washing His feet. And so should we. We've already seen Christ did this, in part, to set the example for us. This chapter urges us to love one another - our fellow Christians, our fellow disciples, our brothers and sisters in Christ. But this is hard work. This is *humbling, vulnerable work*. When we humble ourselves to one another, we make ourselves vulnerable. When we open our hearts to sacrificially love one another, we open our hearts up to the possibility of pain, hurt, disappointment, and betrayal. Some of us have experienced this before. Even just *joining* a church family can be difficult when you've been hurt by a church in the past. Some here today have baggage from painful experiences in the past, where we were hurt by those we were trying so hard to serve, love, and care for. Maybe you've been hurt by fellow Christians before; maybe by a church you were part of and serving. Maybe you've felt betrayed by Christians and churches and even specific church leaders. Maybe the idea of joining or serving again is scary for you. Maybe the idea of getting personally involved in one another's lives - letting people in - and truly loving one another is terrifying for you. Maybe you're thinking to yourself that you just don't know if you could ever open your heart up to love

and humbly serve like that again, because you're just not sure if you could bear the pain of hurt and betrayal again. Maybe you're wondering, "Would God *really* want me to do that?"

Yes, Christ is calling you to follow His example, to humbly serve and love His people, your fellow Christians and disciples, even when it's difficult; even those who might end up betraying you, hurting you, letting you down, or walking away. But Christ is only asking you to do what He Himself did for you. He is inviting you to *become more like Him!* And that's the very essence of Christian growth, isn't it? To grow as a Christian is to become more like Jesus. That's the goal. That is the goal of everyone who is saved by grace and loves Jesus. We want to follow Him, to be like Him. And that means loving and humbly serving His people, our fellow Christians, even when they might hurt, disappoint, or let us down - even betray us, or walk away from the faith. If we don't, then all we're doing is impeding our own spiritual growth; you're robbing yourself of the opportunity to become more like Jesus. We can humbly serve and love them anyways because we aren't doing it to gain anything from them; we're doing it because of how much we love Jesus, who has already given us *everything*, even Himself!

Thirdly, this is a sobering warning to us. God's sovereignty over the situation does not let Judas off the hook; he is still responsible for his sin, unbelief, and betrayal. He rejects Jesus and will have no part of salvation. He remains dead in his sins and is not washed clean. He leaves the presence of Christ and steps out into the dark of night, choosing the darkness of Sin and Satan instead. This is a sobering warning to us: *do not reject the grace and salvation that Christ is mercifully offering you!* Christ offers to wash you clean, to cleanse you within from all your sin, to make you whole, to save your very soul! If you reject Christ, you will not be saved. If you turn away from Christ, don't be fooled: you will be following the Devil instead, just like Judas was; and just like Judas, and you will die in your sins and enter into eternal darkness in Hell. Don't reject Christ! If you refuse to come to Christ and surrender your life to Him, what you're doing is refusing to let Him wash you clean. You're choosing darkness over light, Satan over God, death and Hell over life and salvation! Satan is a horrible master; He wants to use and abuse and destroy you. But Jesus is a humble Lord and Master, a gracious King; He gave Himself up *for you*. Friend, don't wait until it's too late - come to Christ today.

Because, finally, this passage should encourage us. We've seen that Christ humbly, lovingly served even one who would betray him. In vv.36-39, we see he did the same for Peter, one who would deny Jesus three times, that very night. Yet unlike Judas, Peter will repent and

believe, and be saved! Peter wants to follow Jesus, but can't yet; Peter can't go to the cross to make atonement, only Christ can do that. Peter must acknowledge his need for Christ to die for him and save him. He must first let Jesus was him. And so must we. In order to follow, we must first have faith. Faith precedes following. It all begins with confessing our need of Jesus.

Friend, maybe you've betrayed Jesus by sinning against Him; maybe you've denied Him in unbelief; which one of us hasn't? Yet Christ stands ready to forgive you because His love goes beyond what you can imagine. No matter how low you've sunk, Christ is prepared to stoop even lower to wash you clean and save you. He went all the way down into the grave itself! See the love of Christ for you! See the humility and self-sacrificial love of Christ, the Suffering Servant! Run to Christ and let Him wash you clean by His redeeming blood. Repent and turn to trust in Christ completely and be saved. Don't wait. And don't let any excuse stop you from coming. He will not refuse you because of something you have done. Repent of it, confess it to the Lord and ask Him to forgive you for what you've done - even for denying Him! - and He will, so long as you trust in His grace completely. If Christ washes you, then you shall be perfectly clean! Repent and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior; ask Him to forgive and save you, trusting that He died and rose for you, and you shall be washed clean by His grace through faith in His redeeming blood. Trust Him to wash you clean and you shall be forgiven.

Once you do, the next step is to profess your faith in baptism - as you publicly profess that you are repenting of your sins and putting in your faith in Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross for your salvation, and are plunged beneath the waters, it shows that Jesus is washing you clean - that you are washed not by water, but by what it represents: the blood of Christ! Just as Jesus washing the disciples' feet pointed to being washed by His blood through faith, so does the "washing" of baptism."

And if you are already a believer, this passage calls us to daily acknowledge our need for Christ to wash away our sins, to let Him wash us through faith, and then strive to follow Him. We must daily keep our need for Jesus and His cross before Him, as both our gracious salvation and our example to follow. And that's exactly what the Lord's Supper represents, which Christ instituted the same night He washed the disciples' feet, where we proclaim our faith in Christ washing us clean by what the meal represents: his death on the cross. So if you're a baptized believer in good standing, we invite you to come to the Table with us after a brief moment of silence as we prepare to come.