
Christ, the Servant of God

John 13:1-35

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Fine dining experience

Given how we attend to and the kind of service we give to those who are wealthy and famous, then it only seems reasonable to assume that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords would receive at least as much attention and service at a special meal. Let's see how that looks. Please turn your copy of God's Word to John 13 and follow along as I read. <Read verses 1-20>.

<PRAY>

Description of the Room

In order to be able to interpret this passage rightly, we must put it into the context of the times. With all due respect to Leonardo da Vinci, he was a great painter, but he did not know his Bible well enough to paint what it probably looked like. His depiction of the Last Supper with all of the Disciples sitting around a nice ornate table with Christ at the center is not what scholars tell us it was really like. In those days, any home that had an upper room was available for use by all the people who were there to celebrate the Passover. It was a large room that was on the second level. Only those with financial means were able to afford an upper room. It was normally able to hold between 10 and 20 people. Jesus had given instructions for Peter and John to go into the city, and prepare for the Passover meal. He gave them detailed instructions to follow a man with a jar of water and prepare it where he leads them.

Normally, a servant was stationed at the door whose job was to wash the guests feet as they entered. There was no servant. I wonder if some of the disciples started thinking about who was to blame—Peter or John for not making adequate preparations. Or, if it happened in today's American culture, Peter and John may have said to each other, "Man, don't you hate it when the automatically add an 18% gratuity to the bill for large groups." Or maybe they were just guys – who cares if your feet are dirty. There aren't any women around.

The furnishings of the room were a very short table in the shape of a semi-circle. There were mats on the floor. Reclining at the short table was reserved for special meals, and the Passover celebration was definitely one of those special meals. People laid on their left side and propped their head on their left hand. Their feet were fanned out and each person's head was at the level of the person on their left side's chest. There was normally a large communal bowl in the center containing the broth or sauce for dipping. This is nothing like a large

oblong table at which people sat in straight lines eating off of fine china with utensils and drinking from fine goblets. In God's providential care, John, the disciple that Jesus loved, was sitting to the right of Jesus and Judas was probably sitting to the left of Jesus.

In my imagination, I can guess that the disciples probably didn't care that much that there wasn't anyone available to wash their feet, but someone could at least wash Jesus' feet. But the interesting thing about it, is that no one volunteered.

Christ Knows Who He Is – The Servant of God

Look with me at verse 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”. And verse 3 “Jesus, *knowing* that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God”. Drop down to verse 11, “For he *knew* who was to betray him”. Jesus was well aware of who He was, what was happening, and what was going to happen. Jesus came as the servant and has been telling his disciples all along that He came to serve, but they are not understanding it in the way that Jesus means it. In Luke 22:24-26, Jesus is telling the disciples what He has come to do here on earth. The disciples have been arguing about who is going to be the greatest in His Kingdom and Jesus tells them what they are to be like and what He is:

“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as *the one who serves*.”

In Mark 10:45, Jesus plainly tells his disciples what his mission and identity on earth are:

“For even the Son of Man came *not to be served but to serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The passage in Philippians 2 verses 5-7 takes on a different perspective when we are looking at Christ and His being the servant of God:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, *taking the form of a servant*”

One more passage to understand that Christ knew He was the servant of God. John 8:27-30:

“They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. *He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.*”

In the counsels of the Trinity in eternity past, the redemption of mankind was planned and Jesus voluntarily took the form of a servant becoming the Servant of God Who served His Father every moment of His existence on earth. He was well aware of His place in the eter-

nal counsels of the Godhead. He was the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, but He was the Servant of God to redeem the creation from its rebellion and sin.

The disciples thought they knew who He was. All the time that the disciples were with Jesus, He kept telling them that He was going to be betrayed, killed, and be raised from the dead. His Kingdom was not the kingdom that they envisioned. His Kingdom was from above. When Jesus asked Peter who he thought Christ was, Peter pronounced that He was the Christ. But there was no comprehension of what that meant. They had seen His miracles, heard His teaching, been with Him when he prayed, saw Him cleanse the temple, seen Him transfigured before their eyes, give sight to the blind, feed thousands, confront the religious Pharisees, and observed His holy life. Yet, when He tells them that He must die, they don't get it. When He tells them that they must serve one another, they don't comprehend it. When He tells them that the way to be first is to be last, they can't make sense out of it. They don't understand that he is Christ, THE Servant of God. He must show them what it means to be a servant of God. And He must show us what it means to be a servant of God.

The Servant Serves

The first thing that we need to see is that a servant serves. That seems too obvious, but it is so obvious that neither the disciples nor we understand what that means. Christ gives a very upsetting object lesson showing what serving means.

The custom in those times was to have your feet washed as you entered the house and certainly before you laid down to have a meal. There was no servant present to do the foot washing. If anyone should have had someone wash his feet, it should have been the One Who they called the Christ! But no one moved.

When supper was served, He got up from his mat, took the dress of a servant, and washed each disciple's feet. I am sure that the disciples were extremely embarrassed. The custom was such that peers didn't even wash each other's feet. The task was reserved for the lowliest of menial servants and here was Jesus washing their feet! It is so stunning that they are unable to speak – except Peter.

Peter gives the opportunity for Christ to show them his supreme act of service. Peter's words show an indignity. He says, "Lord, do **YOU** wash **MY** feet?" He had to object to this turn about. Once again, Peter and the disciples show that they do not yet understand that this One that they highly esteem must go to the cross. And they cannot understand this symbolic act which precedes it. Let's read again what is happening here: <read verses 6-11>.

Jesus is taking this opportunity to show how He must go to the cross in order to wash his disciples. Notice how He said that they didn't understand what He was doing now, but that they would later. Again Peter is the spokesman who plainly displays that no, in fact, they don't yet understand. He is still thinking at the level of what is socially fitting to do at this time. "You shall never wash my feet!" is his response to something that he doesn't yet understand. But Jesus correctly answers them all that if they are not washed by Him, if the Lamb of God has not washed away their sins, then they have no part with Him. It is obvious that no one but Jesus knew to what He was referring. That is why He told them that they would understand it all later. They would remember this night and the significance of His display would all make sense.

So Christ's serving was in this moment in the upper room, but His ultimate serving was when He was God's Servant Who went to the most vial of deaths – the death of the cross for those He came to save.

The Servant Is Humble

This next description of a servant also seems obvious – a servant is humble. But the disciples didn't know what humility was, and neither do we. So once again, Jesus shows us what being humble is.

As I have already said, washing feet in those days was not something done by everyone. It was a task assigned to the lowest of servants. Some Jews believed that it was such a lowly job, that they wouldn't even let Jewish servants wash feet. It was left to the Gentile servants to wash feet. Also included in that group who had the privilege of washing feet would be women, children, and pupils. And it was not even considered that peers would stoop to wash their peers feet. So when Jesus got up as the food was being served, I am sure that everyone looked at Him in disbelief as He set aside His seamless garment and wrapped the towel around His waist. This is so not right! He is the Christ! He can't wash feet! Where are the servants!

It is understandable that the disciples are shocked. They are probably shamefaced that they didn't volunteer to do at least the feet of Jesus. But they were also shocked because their sense of cultural normality is being turned upside down. So their reluctance to volunteer for the task was understandable, but that makes Christ's humility all the more glaring.

But I wonder if Paul doesn't have this event in mind as he writes in Philippians 2. We read from it earlier. Let me read again verses 3-11:

“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, 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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The symbolism of Christ taking off his outer garment and putting on the garment of a servant is described in the Philippians passage. He humbled Himself, He Who was in very nature God, and took the very nature of a servant. He then gave His life as a ransom for sin, and when that cleansing was complete, He put His outer garment back on symbolizing the glory that He would bring to His Father.

But His humility went even farther. He knew who were His own, and He knew who was going to betray Him. Yet, He washed Judas's feet just like He did all the others. How would you and I have responded to someone we knew was our enemy? Would we have served them? Would we have stooped so low as Jesus did? My answer is that I probably wouldn't have. I can't answer for you.

The Servant Loves

Notice how John begins this chapter. Look at verse 1 again:

“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.”

Another translation says that, “He now showed the disciples the full extent of his love.” (New Living Translation). In fact, John bookends this story with the discussion of love. Look at verses 34-35:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It is evident that John wants us to know that all servant hood must be bathed in love. The way that Jesus displayed His love for His own was going to the cross in their place and by humbling Himself in this act of foot washing.

John is letting us know that there cannot be real servant hood unless there is love. The acts done out of duty instead of by love are robbed of their delight both to the doer and to the receiver. It is a hollow act that takes on the form of hypocrisy. If you don't believe that, just tell your spouse that the only reason you just kissed them was because kissing is something required of a good spouse. And after all, you want to be considered a good spouse. You will understand very quickly that love is something that must be involved!

But look at the love of all of the disciples present. Not only did He love the ones who were His, but He loved the one who was not His, Judas. How do we know that? First of all, He washed Judas's feet. He took the same care with Judas as He did with the others. Since He knew that Judas was going to betray Him that night, it took love for Him to not just speak the word and there would have been nothing more than smoke blowing away from his mat. Also, look with me at verses 21-30. <Read>.

Jesus has become troubled in His spirit. He wants to continue to tell his disciples ahead of time what is going to happen so that they will believe that He is the One Who has come from God to take away the sin of the world. In verse 19 He is concerned about them continuing to believe after He is betrayed. <read verse 19>. So He wants them to observe His telling them ahead of time so they will remember later and understand.

He tells them again that one of them is going to betray Him. In other Gospel accounts, the disciples begin to ask Him if it is they. Again, this demonstrates that they do not understand the foot washing which symbolizes the agonizing cross that awaits Him. Peter is sitting somewhere around the table where he can see John. He motions to John to ask Jesus who it is. John rolls onto his back and rests his head on Jesus' chest and quietly asks Him who is going to betray Him. Remember that the person on the right side has his head at the chest level of the person behind him. This way, the person could have a private conversation with the person without anyone else being involved. Jesus answers John that He will identify the betrayer by giving him the morsel of bread that He will dip. The morsel of bread was the most tasty part of the meal. Traditionally, the host of the feast would take this morsel, dip it into the common bowl, and give it to a guest to honor them. Remember, Judas was probably

sitting on the left of Jesus. This is the place of honor at the table, to sit on the left side of the host. When Jesus dipped the morsel of bread and put it into the mouth of Judas, the one lying in the honored place, He was showing this final act of supreme love for this one who would betray Him. It was almost like Jesus was saying to Judas, "My love for you is meant to help you surrender your heart to God". But Judas took the morsel and went out quickly, as Jesus told him to. And when John ends verse 30 with the sentence, "And it was night.", he is making a statement that the darkness was falling around THE Servant of God. His love and the extent of His love has been shown to all.

The Servant Commands

Notice that Jesus doesn't model servant hood and then take His place at the table. He gives two commands. The first command is found in verses 12-17 <read>.

He is now giving the other symbolic meaning of the foot washing. He is explaining to them that they are also servants. He has given them an example of what being a servant consists of. And he hits them right between the eyes. Can you feel it? Does your conscience scream out for relief? He has taken away all excuses for not being servants. He has been the ultimate example of a servant of God.

The argument goes something like this:

It is only natural, that a servant is not above doing anything that the one he serves does. I am your master. I have shown you that a servant must be humble and that he must serve. I have served you in the most lowly and menial task. You have no reason to excuse yourselves from any task when it comes to serving others. The point is painfully clear. There is no one who serves another who has a right to judge any task beneath him after his master has already done it. So now that you know these things, do them! You will be blessed in what you do, not what you know.

The second command is found in verses 34-35 <read>. He takes up the other part of servant hood, that of love. He has given us the supreme example of love, both to those that are His, and to those who are not His. He doesn't allow for a love that is different from His. We are to love just as He has loved us.

Conclusion

Well, this message has been going through my mind for several weeks, and it has been good for me to evaluate my own life as a servant. Since Christ is THE Servant of God, and I am to be like Him, then how do I measure up? How do you measure up? It's time to start meddling.

Let's begin with how we are doing at serving those who are in the household of God. Let's start with your family. How intentional are you being in making sure that your home and the people who live there are becoming better servants? Is your home a place where people live, or is it a place where people serve each other? Is there time to plan for serving, both in the home and at church? You look at me with shock like the disciples had. Time. Are your kidding. We don't even have time to eat together. Who are you trying to fool? Maybe it's time to evaluate all of those activities that are occupying your time. Are you training your children to be humble and loving servants? There's no time, you say. Well, do they have to be involved in soccer, football, track, basketball, swimming, Tai-Kwon-Do, Judo, golf, music

lessons, plays, band, cheerleading, accelerated classes, special tutoring to make sure they continue to advance, and on and on the list goes. I believe a careful evaluation of your activities and busyness would be a good use of your time. Husbands, are you being a servant, or do you expect everyone else to serve you. Husbands, is it beneath you to do the dishes, change a diaper, run the sweeper, spend time with your children and give your wife a night out, take time for casual and intimate conversation, take walks, or go shopping? Wives, are you being a servant or do you expect to be waited on according to your desires? Do you fix special meals, sit and watch a sporting event, listen to your husband when he talks about work and the pressure he's under? And do your children observe your lives and see the humility and love that a servant should have?

How about your family at the Chapel? Are you vitally involved in your flock? Is there a humility and love to serve those with whom you are connected in your flock? Do you love them in such a way that you think about them and the needs and issues that they wrestle with? Are you purposely setting aside some money in order to help someone out when there is a financial need? Does your love show in such a way that outsiders can look and say that you must be a disciple of Christ's because of your love for one another?

I have been the recipient of one of our Chapel families providing for a great need that we had several years ago. I was so surprised. I mentioned that there was a possibility of us being in a situation that was outside of my control that would require more money than I had available. I was totally unprepared when one of the men approached me several months later and asked me how that situation was going. I told him that just that past week it had happened. He asked me what the amount of the need was and explained that he and his wife had been setting aside money every payday, just in case the situation should come about. He offered to give me that money right then.

There are so many other areas that we don't have time to consider. Such areas as work, school, neighbors, organizations. You must take the initiative to consider them.

But let's get really down and dirty. Are you intentional in serving the unbelievers that are all around you? Christ loved the one who was His betrayer and served him like he was one of His own. How many unbelievers do you have a relationship with in order to be a humble and loving servant? Are you setting aside resources in order to ask someone to play golf, go to a sporting event, go out to dinner? Are you purposefully using resources to enlarge the Kingdom of God?

One last area? Is your serving motivated by love, by duty, or by some other motivation? Do you look at other people through eyes that love, or through eyes that tolerate, or worse yet, through eyes of hypocrisy?

Let me leave you with these two passages of Scripture:

“When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? 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.’”

Are you believing and acting like you are greater than your master and messenger?

And then this verse which takes on a new perspective once we have considered what a servant really is:

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Will you hear that from the lips of your Savior, THE Servant of God, when you arrive home?

PRAY