

John 13:1-30 “Leading Low”

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[0 : 01] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us. We are returning this morning to our study of John's Gospel, the account that is written by Jesus' closest disciple of Jesus' life.

In order, John says, he writes it that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that as we believe in Him, we would find life in His name.

That's why we are looking to encounter the real Jesus here, because some of us in this room are still trying to decide what we think about and how we engage with the most influential person in the history of the world, right?

Because all of us here have friends and neighbors who are wondering about where to find true life in a really difficult world. And because those of us who have believed in Jesus, often, we especially, we really struggle day by day truly to find our joy and our life and our satisfaction in Jesus all the time, as opposed to in other things.

And so, as we've been going through, John, we've seen Jesus already performing all sorts of signs that point to His unique divinity, to His power over all of creation, to His identity as the source of life.

[1 : 40] And now we reach chapter 13, and the next five chapters, if you've never read the Gospel of John, are just packed with powerful, awesome stuff.

Probably, in five chapters, we go just maybe a little more than five hours in His life. And we get so many vital and memorable teachings from Jesus the day before He dies on the cross.

It's not Jesus just merely imparting some personal words from His deathbed, so to speak. But actually, Jesus is commissioning those He is sending out to represent Him and His kingdom in this world.

And He's got really important things to say, so listen up, because that's us. He's speaking to you. This fall, Lord willing, we're going to cover chapters 13 through 17.

I just wanted to whet your appetite for a second before we read. Jesus is in the upper room with His disciples. We get to listen in. Today, we get the foot washing.

[2 : 48] Then the command to love one another so everyone will know that you're my disciples by your love for one another. Next, Jesus talks about the mansions, the home that He's going to prepare a place for them, and that He is the way there, and the truth, and the life.

He will teach us about abiding in Him, branches in the vine, right? About His Holy Spirit that He is sending so that we can do even greater things than He has done, and about the peace that we can have in the midst of the troubles of this world, because He has overcome the world.

A lot of stuff He wants to say. And then finally, Jesus prays for us. He says a lot of things to us, and He prays for us a prayer about our union with Him and His Father, and about our unity with one another.

It's going to be awesome. All of those incredible, life-giving, purpose-providing, hope-infusing words coming soon. I can't cover them all this morning, okay?

Sorry. But we're going to get there, and Lord willing, this fall. Today, we start with show and tell. As Jesus does something that is totally unexpected, and then He explains why He does it.

[4 : 06] We're going to come back to two sections of this story later today, so when I skip, I'm coming back to it. Don't worry. But for now, I'm going to read what Jesus does, and then His explanation to His followers.

John 13, beginning at verse 1. This is God's holy word. 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.

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, 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, 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.

Skipping down to verse 12. 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?

[5 : 24] 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. Pray with me. Jesus, what a wonderful reminder to us.

Thank you for your example. Thank you for your love. Would you teach it more to us now by your Spirit? Would you change us by it?

As you send us into this world, we ask in your name. Amen. Amen. Try to put yourselves in the sandals of one of Jesus' disciples this memorable Thursday night.

[6 : 33] I mean, it's been a pretty amazing three years, right? You've been walking with him. There's been miracles that you've never seen before. Teaching that has just amazed you.

You've been traveling and sleeping and eating with this Jesus. And just this week, you've arrived in Jerusalem with lots of other people.

And the crowds, they're cheering your rabbi. Hosanna! And then, with many of them watching, he cleanses the temple and he's driving out the money changers.

Every moment of this bustling feast week seems to be just bursting with significance. And y'all are always going and doing. And now you finally get to crash in an upper room.

Privately. It's just about 13 of you. There's a special Passover dinner ready. You're chatting with your buddies. You're so glad to be relaxing together around the table.

[7 : 34] And then, all of a sudden, here comes one of the servants to wash your feet. Only you stop your conversation and you notice it's not a household servant.

It's Jesus. Dirt and sweat, toe by toe, stooping down before you, is the man you've been following.

The one you've been learning from, even beginning to worship. Jesus has lowered himself beneath your feet.

What is going on? What's he doing? Why is Jesus lowering himself? Well, John tells us it has to do with at least two things.

He's loving and leading. Verse 1. Now, before the feast of Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come, we've been hearing about this hour, right?

[8 : 41] The hour of Jesus' death. It keeps not being his hour. Now it's come, his hour to depart out of the world to the Father. It comes during the Passover feast when the lambs are sacrificed.

Christ. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. To the end of his life, perhaps.

Or it can also mean the fullness, the full extent of his love. He's modeling love for his disciples. That agape love that Pastor Derek mentioned recently is most natural in its stooping, right?

The higher bending to raise the lower. That kind of love. Even more particularly, though, Jesus is modeling how to lead.

We might say servant leadership. Verse 3. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, that he had come from God, that he was going back to God.

[9 : 54] He's the one who is controlling all things, right? The emissary of heaven. God himself come down to earth and showing us now how in everything he is preeminent first place.

How? How is he going to prove that? Well, in case we have any math people here, it's the parabola. You will hear the extent of my knowledge of the parabola now.

It's a parabola. Jesus' path downward from infinite heights of glory to dusty toes of men before rising again to glory.

I'm going to talk about this path mostly in terms of how we lead, what leadership looks like, but don't forget it's about love too, right? How do we lead or love?

Love. Watch. Jesus says. This is how by humbly serving, by lowering yourself. Jesus takes on the dress, the posture, the role of a servant.

[11 : 13] A role that in many places and times was beneath even a Jewish servant. Only Gentile servants doing foot washing. It's so lowly.

It's so beneath everyone else. And yet Jesus retrieves the water. Jesus carries the basin. Jesus scrubs their feet.

Jesus dries them gently. Jesus is their leader, their teacher, but he's made this point to them before that he is among them as one who serves Luke 22.

As his disciples argue about what greatness is and which one of them is greater than the other, that he came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, Matthew 20.

And at this time, in a perhaps unmatched way until the very next day when he gives his very life, Jesus doesn't merely tell them about humble leadership, about leading low.

[12 : 22] He shows them, doesn't he? Can you imagine the difference? They feel it personally, don't they? Intimately. They feel it between their toes.

Can you imagine? Church Father Severian of Gabala around 400 AD said it beautifully. He who wraps the heavens in clouds wrapped around himself a towel.

He who pours the water into the rivers and pools tipped water into a basin. And he before whom every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth knelt to watch the feet of his disciples.

Marvel for just a minute. This is Jesus, right? I actually encounter Jesus. Here he is. Where are you going to find him when he's with his people?

You better look low. You better look down towards the bottom. You better look for the servant. The king of glory with a towel wrapped around his waist.

[13 : 33] Isn't it such a poignant and powerful display of humility and of true strength? strength? The prince of heaven with the dirt of earth under his fingernails.

Wow. When Jesus resumes his place at the table he wants to make sure that his disciples get the message. It's possible they may have missed one or two over the last few years.

Verse 14. 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.

Our path should look the same as his lowering ourselves. In fact we only have to worry about the lowering part. He takes care of the raising.

We don't even have to bother. Not our deal. We don't have to promote. We don't have to exalt self. We get to humble and he raises up. Now if that seems like an easy message to you it's not.

[14 : 47] Jesus is clear. Take note that he adds a warning. Verse 16. Don't think you're above this. He said. We so naturally think too highly of ourselves don't we?

Jesus says keep going down and don't think you need to stop till you've gotten as low as your master is. You're not above me. And then he adds a promise.

Verse 17. This is not going to be easy but blessing true soul fulfilling happiness is in serving rather than being served.

Believe it Jesus says. Have you experienced that reality? I bet many of you have. Do you believe that truth? Are you sure that true happiness is not in lying on the sofa with a cold lemonade and the Olympics on the TV and somebody rubbing your toes?

Are you sure that leadership is not about power? Tough talk? Social influence? Personal charisma? Are you sure?

[15 : 59] Jesus is teaching us true leadership. In fact true love. To lead others you have to lower yourself.

You're not leading others like Jesus unless you are lowering yourself. I want to show you this picture of Bob Greenman from about 10 years ago.

Bob's there in the in the foreground. Bob was a retired Navy sub-captain in his 70s at the time. The oldest elder on the Southwood session then.

Bob worked so hard he took minutes of all of our meetings month after month after month for years. and then on VBS week he washed the feet of our kids one after another bending down toe by toe probably hurt.

I love that picture but this is not merely about washing feet with water and towels.

[17 : 13] There are countless ways to lower yourself to love and to lead others. To lead others you have to lower yourself like Jesus.

Think with me about what that means for different ones of us. elders you're not leading until the most stubborn wandering difficult sheep in your care knows that he is valued and pursued by you.

Are you lowering yourself in order to serve the flock? Bosses you're not leading until you serve and love the lowest ranking person at your office?

Are you lowering yourself to lift them up even when it costs you or your bottom line? Husbands you're not leading until your wife hears that you are not always right and until you also clean something up around the house every once in a while too.

Are you lowering yourself to sacrifice for her? It's the way Jesus loves and leads. Parents you're not leading until your kids see you fall down and need Jesus too.

[18 : 38] Are you lowering yourself to the point that you can point them up to the servant king? Have you gotten low enough that they're starting to see him in the way you serve them?

Cool kids that's all of you right? You're not leading until the weirdest most left out kid in your class on your team in your youth group is lifted up on your shoulders.

Are you lowering yourself to include and to honor those that everybody else is excluding and mocking laughing at?

Grace group leaders we're thankful for you but you're not leading until you've taken extra time to listen to a hurting friend in your group.

Are you lowering yourself to meet your brothers and sisters in their darkest and lowest places is that what leading your group looks like or are you just in charge of deciding what we talk about?

[19 : 55] Friends lowering yourself like that is not even a big step down for us right? It was a massive leap down for Jesus when he came the prince of heaven has to stoop beneath our feet and because he has stooped to love us in our weakness in our struggle in our lowliness at our lowest points we then as his people and those he sends into the world seek to love the least think think of someone in need that you know we seek to love the lost someone who's seeking hope the littlest can you think of someone in the next generation someone smaller than you we seek to love the lonely someone perhaps in the older generation we want to love the left out do you know someone that others are overlooking lower yourself humble yourself

Jesus says that's leadership that's love you actually need to think of someone specific these are 12 disciples who have names and faces and feet love that person that God's bringing to your mind right now to lead others you have to lower yourself and then and then when you do you'll be representing the king who leads and loves like that right when in the midst of this amazing scene there are two really important interactions that we haven't read yet but we need to notice briefly multiple times throughout this story there's a mention of betrayal we get more at verse 18 Jesus says I'm not speaking of all of you I know whom I have chosen but the scripture will be fulfilled he who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me

I'm telling you this now before it takes place that when it does take place you may believe that I am he I'm the one that this is about I'm the God who's being betrayed to his death truly truly I say to you whoever receives the one I send receives me and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me after saying these things Jesus was troubled in his spirit the great enemy death comes back on the scene and causes this emotional turmoil for Jesus it's the same word we saw at the grave of Lazarus troubled he's troubled truly truly I say to you one of you will betray me the disciples looked at one another uncertain of whom he spoke none of them expected this didn't see it coming verse 23 so one of his disciples whom Jesus loved was reclining at table close to

Jesus so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking hey ask him ask him who he's talking about so that disciple leaning back against Jesus said Lord who is it Jesus answered it is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it so when he had dipped the morsel he gave it to Judas the son of Simon Iscariot then after he had taken the morsel Satan entered into him and Jesus said to him what you are going to do do quickly the money bag Jesus was telling him to the poor so after receiving the morsel of bread he immediately went out and it was night darkness it was night but we'll be reminded here that darkness is not beyond

God's knowledge it's not beyond God's control Jesus knew who would betray him verse 11 Jesus knew that it had been foretold and even that this betrayal would serve God's master plan of redemption I hope you can remember that when it is night in your life when the darkness seems to be closing in it may be for you right now this may be in a day to come you need to remember that you can be overwhelmed and God's still working there in the storm in the darkness that you can't see through he can and he's holding you tight but two other lessons for us from the Judas piece of this story even when faced with the love of Jesus some will serve themselves for thirty pieces of silver perhaps for some religious prestige

[25 : 09] Judas has his feet washed by his master and then in the same night betrays him with a kiss that's remarkable friends please don't walk away from Jesus as he offers his love to you this morning see what's even more remarkable to me is not Judas that that's wild but what about Jesus what's so remarkable is that Jesus knowing who would betray him to a horrible death that has his heart troubled has just done what washed Judas's feet what grace what humility can you imagine our master shows us that people don't have to be worthy of our washing their feet do they they don't have to play nice for you to serve them they don't even have to respond with gratitude to be recipients of your sacrificial gifts leading and loving is about lowering yourself moving toward the unworthy it's not about evaluating worthiness finally there's an important interaction between

Jesus and Peter that I skipped over in our reading so far all the disciples were surprised to find Jesus at their feet don't you think Peter was appalled and when Peter feels something Peter says it doesn't he rarely he keeps his thoughts to himself verse 6 Jesus is washing their feet and he came to Simon Peter who said to him Lord do you wash my feet you washing my feet I'm confused Jesus answered him yeah you're confused what I am doing you do not understand now but afterward you will understand there's more than meets the eye going on here Peter Peter said to him you shall never wash my feet Jesus answered him if I do not wash you you have no share with me Peter this is about our relationship oh well then I'm all in

Simon Peter said to him Lord not my feet only but also my hands and my head oh if this is about relationship with you yes Jesus all of me Jesus said to him Peter the one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet but is completely clean and you plural all of you here are clean but not every one of you for he knew who was to betray him that was why he said not all of you are clean this whole scene of lowering himself to love and lead it's not primarily about hygiene is it it's not even merely about servant leadership it's not about washing your hands before dinner Peter it's too much to take in right now I know you don't understand but I'm going to explain Jesus says and after I tell you about a Passover with my body given for you with my blood shed for you after

I go to a cross tomorrow and die for you because my hour has now come then then you'll understand Peter what's happening this is about that see because of this special relationship we have Peter because of what I'm doing for you you are completely clean did you notice that this is a relationship of grace isn't it you come needy you contribute your sin you come dirty and I wash you clean dear ones if you have forgotten that if you forgot what it means to have a relationship with Jesus I want you to feel the hands of Jesus this morning stooping to rub the dirt off the dirtiest parts of your life amazing grace if you trust Jesus that's all if you come to Jesus you are completely clean and don't you ever forget it don't you ever tell him that you don't need to be washed by him don't you ever tell him that his cleansing makes you kind of clean but not enough no completely clean in fact because by his grace you are completely clean you can come back to

Jesus day by day by day and you can confess that you need your feet washed you can repent of your sins you can have specific dirt acknowledged and confessed and he will cleanse you from all unrighteousness that's his promise in fact Christian one who's been walking closely with Jesus for years like Peter you must still repent you must lower yourself because you're not on your own better than anyone else around you you must regularly remind yourself of your cleansing coming only from Jesus so daily as you talk with Jesus in prayer weekly as we gather and confess our sin and hear his assurance of pardon regularly as you watch the waters of baptism wash over another child of

[31 : 11] God you come with dirt and you declare even because I live with Jesus I am completely clean every time you need to hear that every time you need to feel that and experience that truth in fact every time somebody needs to tell your neighbors right somebody needs to tell Huntsville there's a bath you can take where you'll never get dirty again amen there's a pool you jump in where you'll never be hot again there's a fountain you can drink from where you'll never be thirsty again because when Jesus washes you you are completely clean praise the Lord see that's the very nature of your relationship with Jesus I think many of us are like Peter I know I often am we actually like to be the one who serves at least on our terms right the ways we're comfortable with we don't really like being the one served I'll bring you the meal thank you very much

I'll take that check don't pay for me I'll carry those plates and both of my kids in the other arm at the same time while walking across them I'm the strong one here you felt that I have listen to me fellow Peters that's not how relationship with Jesus works we may think of ourselves as servants of Jesus but he he is the servant par excellence he keeps leading and loving us lowering himself to meet with us our relationship with him is one where he serves us as he humbles himself to the point of death even death on a cross so then we join him in serving others because he serves us first we lead humbly because we're following him we love why because he first loved us he's doing it again this morning at this table he's serving you he has set the table he has provided the food

Jesus is present to serve you as you bring yourself and your sins afresh to him to be washed and reminded again at this table how clean he makes you how clean completely clean don't like Peter initially did don't resist this kind of relationship with Jesus you come and eat with Jesus today because he has come all the way down to you he's in the dirt to find you where you are he's humbled himself to love and to lead you he's doing it again today it was on that very night where he washed the feet of his friends where one of them betrayed him that our Lord Jesus took bread and he broke it and he gave it to his disciples as

I ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take and eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me and in the same way after supper he took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins drink from it all of you for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes you proclaim that that the one you follow goes low first that he died to give you hope that he met you there when that's exactly what you needed if you hear me talking about a relationship with Jesus like this where he completely cleanses you where he totally rescues you and it's all of him and you think that sounds really interesting but I don't really have that kind of relationship I haven't entered into that relationship with Jesus don't come take the bread and wine this morning that picture that very relationship instead consider

Jesus who has come down to you come up close to observe if you would like ask us to pray that but let the elements pass today don't let another day pass without knowing this Jesus who loves you like that but if you are a part of the church of Jesus if you are a part of those people who still feel and look many days like they're covered with dirt and that's true of Jesus church many days in the way we feel and look but if you've been washed by of baptism if you today repent of all of your sins and bring them to him instead of keeping them to yourself to deal with you bring them to him so he makes them completely clean then you come and let him serve you here at this table let the king who stoops to love and to lead you meet you here and you celebrate with him let's pray and we'll do that yourself so that we could have life and hope is a gift beyond our wildest imagination take very normal bread and wine and juice this morning to use them in our hearts to remind us that your grace is greater than our sin that your love is better than life that your path is actually the source of happiness and blessing meet us and strengthen us by your spirit we ask in

[37 : 29] Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org