

Serve One Another

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Our text today is John chapter 13, verses 1 through 20. The sermon text won't be on the screens this morning, so let me invite you to turn there in your Bible if you brought your Bible or on your phone, if you have your Bible app on your phone or if you're at home, any of the above. It's good to be gathered together with you and going to God's Word together. So we've been preaching through the Gospel of John this year, and today we come to a new section of John's Gospel, sometimes called the Farewell Discourse or the Upper Room Discourse. This is chapters 13 through 17, and they recount Jesus's final extended teaching to his disciples before he goes to the cross. And what Jesus is teaching his disciples in these chapters isn't just how to prepare for the next 24 hours of his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, but also what it will mean to be his followers after his resurrection and ascension and outpouring of the Spirit. In other words, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus once Jesus completes his work and returns to the Father? How do we live out the mission that

Jesus has given us here and now? What should we expect along the way? And maybe more importantly, most importantly, what role does God the Holy Spirit play in all of this? This is what Jesus is going to be teaching us in the coming chapters. So as we continue this series in John's Gospel, we're going to slow down a little bit. You know, for the past three and a half months, we've been taking the book in these big sections. Now we're going to slow down and take chapters 13 through 17 in smaller portions so we can really let Jesus's Word sink in as we seek to live our lives as his disciples today. So with that being said, as we start our new kind of chapter in John's Gospel, let me pray and then we'll look at John 13 verses 1 through 20. Would you pray with me?

Our Father in heaven, we ask that you would send your Spirit now as we turn to your Word, that you would bless the reading and the hearing and the proclamation of your Word, that our hearts would be softened to receive what you have to say to us, Spirit, and that we would bear fruit as a result. We ask all this in Christ's name. Amen.

All right, John chapter 13 verses 1 through 20. 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. He came to Simon Peter who said to him, Lord, do you wash my feet? Jesus answered him, what I'm doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand. 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. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

[3 : 2 8] Jesus said to him, 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. For he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, not all of you are clean. When he'd 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. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

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. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.

So John 13 begins with a famous scene of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. And I want to approach this passage today by kind of looking at it in three paragraphs, in three sections. We're going to look first at why Jesus does this. Why does he wash the disciples' feet? Then second, we're going to consider what that means for our relationship to him, our relationship to God. And then third, we're going to consider what that means for our relationship with one another. So let's look first at why Jesus does this. And the answer to that question we have to realize comes when we realize that what Jesus does here is very surprising, and it is also very symbolic. So it's surprising that Jesus washes his disciples' feet, because in the ancient world, washing feet wasn't a very glamorous job. Think about it.

So you walked everywhere in the first century. The streets were dirty. Animals were the only other mode of transportation, and they also made the roads dirty, because they do what animals do. And the major footwear of the day wasn't, you know, Wellington boots. It was sandals. So it doesn't take much historical imagination to realize that people's feet in the first century got really dirty by the end of the day, by the time dinner rolled around. And when you came to a special gathering and reclined at table for dinner, remember people ate at low tables in Jesus' day, so you were reclining. Having your feet washed as you reclined at table was a pretty important thing.

[6 : 12] But because washing someone's feet was a very dirty job, it was considered the kind of work that was only fit for a servant. In fact, some Jews in Jesus' day thought that it was such a demeaning job that Jewish servants shouldn't be forced to do it. It was too degrading for a fellow Jew, Jew, even if they were your servant. So it had to be your Gentile servants who washed feet.

It had to be the people that the culture thought were the sort of lowest of the low. So when Jesus gets up from the table and lays aside his outer garment and takes a towel and ties it around his waist and then pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with a towel that was wrapped around him, Jesus is doing something that no one would imagine him doing. He's taking the place of the lowest of the low.

Now consider that the first century, like ours, was a culture that valued upward mobility, right? Think about it. Today, today we want to meet the right people, go to the right schools, get the right jobs, build the right platform so we can kind of move up the social ladder, so we can move up the scale of cultural influence, of success. And in the first century, you did that through a system of patronage. You sort of connected yourself to someone wealthy or influential, someone in a position of authority or power, and you did favors for them, you worked for them, you supported their household, and then they would do favors for you. They would give you positions of influence and money. Now the means were different back then, but the idea was the same, right? Upward mobility. But look at Jesus here. Do you see how surprising this is? He's not about moving up, but he's about moving down, down to the lowest of the low, down to the place of a servant.

But what Jesus is doing here isn't just surprising, it's symbolic. It's symbolic. We get it, we get our first hint of that in verse 7. Remember when Jesus replies to Peter, what I'm doing now, you do not understand. You don't understand it now, but afterward you will understand. In other words, Jesus is telling Peter that this action of washing their feet is so full of meaning that only after his death and resurrection will the full significance be understood. And we know that Jesus has something deeper in mind from verse 3 as well. Do you see there how John writes, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hand, and they had come from God and was going back to God, then he rose from supper and washed their feet. In other words, at this meal with his disciples, which is probably the meal in the upper room, the Passover meal, what we remember as the Lord's Supper, Jesus, the sort of last supper, Jesus is looking ahead at this meal to what's to come. His mind is on the mission his Father has given him, and with that mission in mind, he gets up and he washes their feet.

[9 : 13] So these two clues in our passage tell us that Jesus means something more by this act of washing the disciples' feet. It's a deeply symbolic act that he's performing, and when we look at the whole of John's gospel, it's actually not hard to see what Jesus is trying to symbolize, what he's trying to do.

Through most of John's gospel, we've seen this kind of literary structure where Jesus does a powerful act, and then there's this long discourse afterward that explains and applies it, whether it's the feeding of the 5,000, or the healing of the paralytic man by the pool of Bethesda, or healing the man born blind. Big act, big significant miracle, long discourse. Now we come to the climax of John's gospel, and the order is reversed. We get a long discourse in chapters 13 through 17, then it's followed by Jesus's greatest act of all, and that great act is his death on the cross. You see, in the first century, crucifixion was a death that was reserved for criminals and slaves, the lowest of the low. Just like washing feet was a job reserved for slaves, for the lowest of the low. Jesus had just told them in chapter 12, what we looked at last week, that his hour had arrived, that he was going to be lifted up on the cross, that he was going to die a shameful death. He had told them this, but now in the upper room, he was going to show them what he meant. By washing their feet, Jesus is showing them in a personal and powerful way what his death on the cross truly means. Now how about you and me? How about us? Now maybe you and I, maybe we see the cross as something that happened a long time ago. You know, we talk about it a lot at church. Maybe you see it as something that, yes, achieved the sort of great eternal plan of God, but the reality is, do you and I see the cross as something real, as real, as powerful, as personal, as the very Son of God taking the place of a servant to wash our feet?

[11 : 25] So this is why Jesus gets up and washes the disciples' feet. This is why he humbles himself in this way. This is why he does this surprising act, to show us what the cross means.

So if that's the case, what are we supposed to see about the cross in this symbolic act? Well, first, we see what it means in our relationship to God, and this is verses 6 through 11, specifically as Jesus engages with Peter, the foot washing speaks of the cleansing that Jesus brings us through the cross, the cleansing that Jesus brings to us. Foot washing, obviously, is an act of cleansing, and the cross is the sort of ultimate act of cleansing, not just of our bodies, but more importantly, of our whole selves, of our souls, of our relationship with God.

Throughout the Old Testament, our sin against a holy God is often depicted as a stain, as an uncleanness. And you know, one of the great themes of the Old Testament is a story of how the dirty, how the stained can be made clean again. How will God cleanse his unclean people? And as the story unfolds in the Old Testament, we see that however God is going to do it, it's going to be costly.

At the tabernacle in the wilderness, then at the temple in Jerusalem, what does God do? He sets up a system of sacrifices. Day by day, week by week, month by month, sacrifices are made for the sins of the people to cleanse them. A very costly system. But this obvious tension arises. How can an animal take away human sin? How can that truly cleanse us?

But when the fullness of time came, and when the people of God had been burdened by the ongoing stain of sin for hundreds of years, when the fullness of time came, God himself came in the person of Jesus.

[13 : 32] And when Jesus comes on the scene in John's gospel, do you remember what John the Baptist proclaims? Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Finally, true cleansing had come.

God had taken human nature and would himself become the effective sacrifice for our sins. The sacrifice that fulfills and ends all other sacrifices to make us clean once and for all.

Jesus humbling himself on the cross, that would be our cleansing. And when he stoops to wash the disciples' feet, he's not just telling them that, he's showing them that. But like Peter, in this passage, we can struggle with that, can't we?

Jesus stoops down to wash our feet and we say, no, Lord, you shouldn't be washing my feet. You should never have to wash my feet. Now, on the one hand, I think Peter's a little embarrassed, right? After all, none of the other disciples got up to wash feet and now Jesus had to do it. So maybe Peter's feeling a little embarrassed. And perhaps on the other hand, perhaps part of Peter wants to honor Jesus. You know, this isn't a job you should be doing. Lord, you're too good for this. But underneath all of our protestation and refusal to be cleansed by Jesus and his humility, underneath it all, isn't it really our pride? Isn't it our pride that pushes away the cleansing that Jesus offers? Because I don't want to be in the place where I have to acknowledge my need and my sin. I don't want to have to acknowledge my weakness and my uncleanness. But Jesus answers Peter and he answers us. He says, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me. In other words, the cleansing that Jesus provides is utterly necessary.

There is no other way to be clean, Jesus says. If we want to have a share with Christ, that is, if we want to have fellowship with him and fellowship with our creator, if we desire to be partakers and participants and inheritors of the kingdom of God, Jesus must wash us. The cross is absolutely necessary. And that just wrecks havoc on our pride. Our sin is so great that the Son of God had to become a servant, stoop to the lowest place, and even die to make us clean.

[16:17] And the reality is, friends, we have to humbly receive the crucified Christ personally by faith in order to be cleansed. You know, if we think that simply coming to church or simply participating in religious activities or being sort of part of a Christian culture or a Christian family or whatever, if we think any of those things will make us clean, we have to think again.

Judas, after all, was there when Christ washed the disciples' feet. Did you notice how often Judas is referred to in this passage?

Now, we'll have more to say about Judas next week when we look at the rest of chapter 13, but the point for us to consider today is this. Friends, Judas received the external foot washing. He received the sign, but he rejected the reality.

Don't let that be you. Don't just attend church services. Don't just participate in the externals of Christianity and then end up rejecting Christ himself.

The necessary thing is the cross, what Jesus has done, and we must receive it. It is utterly necessary. But we also see in this exchange with Peter that the cross is not just necessary to cleanse us, but that the cross is also utterly sufficient to cleanse us.

[17:49] In verse 9, after Jesus tells Peter, If I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Then Peter says, Lord, well, in that case, not only my feet, but my head and my hands. Just go the whole nine. Wash me the whole way.

In other words, then you better wash all of me, Jesus, just to be sure. I want to make sure it's enough. But in verse 10, Jesus says to Peter, The one who is bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean.

Now, what does Jesus mean by that? He means that when you go to a dinner party, the foot washing is sufficient. You don't need to take a whole bath before sitting down to dinner. In the same way, the cross is sufficient.

When Jesus cleanses us, we are completely clean. We don't need to add a single thing to what Jesus achieved on the cross for our spiritual cleansing.

After all, what could we possibly add to the perfect righteousness and perfect sacrifice of the Son of God? If he has given all to you, what could we possibly think there is more to add to that?

[19:03] If he has cleansed us, then we are completely clean. And just as the necessity of the cleansing humbles us, so the sufficiency of the cleansing, it empowers us, does it not?

In Christ, through faith in him alone, we are clean in God's presence. We are robed in royalty. We are seated at his table. And the Father says, come inherit the kingdom I've prepared for you. Come be a part of the new creation right now, right here in the midst of the old. All of your sins, past, present, and future, I've washed away. Now, live as those who are free from guilt and shame. Live as my sons. Live as my daughters who are forever loved and forever clean. And that leads us to the last part of our passage, verses 12 through 20.

As one writer said about this passage, Because if the foot washing shows us the cleansing that Christ brings to us, as far as our relationship goes with God, the foot washing also shows us the example that Christ sets for us in our relationship to one another.

[20:19] When it comes to our relationship with God in Christ, the cross makes us completely clean. When it comes to our relationship with one another in Christ, the cross shows us that we must wash one another's feet, just like Jesus has washed ours.

We must humble ourselves and serve. Jesus says, starting in verse 12, Do you understand what I've 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.

And we need to understand that Jesus isn't talking here about doing this every once in a while. You know, it's not as if Jesus is saying, Go ahead, live your life for upward mobility.

Just remember, every once in a while, give a little something back. You know, volunteer, give some money to charity, stuff like that. No. No. No. Jesus is saying that this has to shape everything.

[21 : 24] The values of the world are turned on their head. As followers of Jesus, we're more interested in downward mobility than in upward mobility. After all, our Lord and teacher's whole life was a life of humility.

All of his authority, all of his wisdom, all of his power, all of his love. And don't you see that in this passage? His sovereignty, his wisdom, his authority, his love. How did he use it while he was on earth?

Not to be served, but to serve. So friends, it's the same for us. Our gifts, our wisdom, our positions of influence, whatever they might be, they need to be exercised not so we can advance, but so that we can serve others.

So that we can lay our lives down for the benefit of others. This is a whole life perspective that we take into all of our roles and calling. Not just something we tack on.

We take it into our whole life at work, at home, in the church. We aren't afraid and we don't recoil to do the lowly act, to do the humble act.

[22 : 34] The act that maybe no one will see, that no one will praise. The act that people might even question if we're wasting our time and our talents. I think of the example of Henry Nouwen.

Nouwen was a professor of spiritual theology at Yale, and then at Harvard. I think while he was at Harvard, he taught the most popular course at the whole university. Isn't that something? He was a best-selling author.

He was a much sought-after speaker. And at the height of his career, after much prayer and discernment, he completely walked away from the academy to eventually serve a community of people with mental and physical disabilities in Toronto.

Can you imagine what his friends must have thought? Henry, you're teaching the most popular course at the most prestigious university, one of the most in the whole world.

And you're going to go serve... I mean, let's be honest.

[23 : 40] You're going to go serve people like that? Oh, but the gospel shatters those things. It was actually Nouwen who coined the phrase, downward mobility to describe the Christian's life of discipleship and service.

That those people with mental and physical disabilities were created in the image of God and had gifts to share. And Nouwen said, I would delight to pour out my life for them.

Now, of course, for many of us, this may not look like walking away from our career or anything so outwardly dramatic.

For most of us, it'll look like changing diapers in the middle of the night. It'll look like caring for an aging parent as they struggle with the early onset of dementia.

It'll look like calling up the lonely member of your small group and inviting them to coffee. It might look like being passed over for a promotion at work because we prioritize our spouse's dream of going back to school rather than working extra hours in the office to catch the boss's attention.

[24 : 58] You see, washing one another's feet is letting yourself take the position of a servant so that others can flourish. Of course, the big question is, how do we do that?

How do we do this? How do we do that without becoming bitter? How do we do that without becoming angry? How do we do that without being riddled by regret or fear of what we might be missing? Well, at the very basic level, we remind ourselves that if Christ has done this for me, how could I not do this for others?

He stooped to wash my feet when I did not deserve it. How could I not do the same for others? But push a little deeper.

When Christ washed the disciples' feet that night, what was his mind set on? It was set on knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that it had come from God and was going back to God. Jesus knew where he had come from and where he was going.

He knew that he was the beloved of the Father and that soon he would be entering into his glory.

And if we are in Christ, the same is true for us. We can take up the most humble place of service in this world because we know where we've come from and we know where we're going.

[26 : 12] We are image bearers of God, created in his likeness, and we are headed to the new heavens and the new earth while we will reign with our Father forever. So right now, we don't need to live an upwardly mobile life of success or prestige or wealth to be okay.

Our identity isn't shattered if we have to stoop and wash feet. We're still children of the King. And we will always be. But push a little deeper still.

Jesus says in verse 17, if you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. In the act of humble service, Jesus says there, in that place, there we find blessing.

Now what does it mean to be blessed, biblically speaking? To be blessed, biblically speaking, means, it means to be truly happy because we are experiencing communion with God.

To be truly happy because we're experiencing communion with God. You see, when we stoop down and take up the towel and do the humbling and even humiliating work of washing feet, whatever that might be, there, in that place, we experience communion with God.

[27 : 33] There, we meet Jesus, our Lord and teacher, who made himself known in the washing of feet. So what is our greatest motivation to humbly serve?

To wash one another's feet? It's the promise that Jesus meets us there. That we are promised a deeper communion there with Christ, our Savior, who, as verse 1 of our passage says, having loved his own who are in this world, he loved them to the end.

This doesn't mean it's going to be easy. In fact, we're going to see in coming chapters, Jesus promises us that it will not be easy, but we will be blessed. We will meet our Savior and know him more fully in that place of washing one another's feet.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you that you have not left us alone to do this.

You have sent your own spirit into our hearts to take the things of you and make them clear to our souls to dwell within us so that we might live like you.

[28 : 52] Lord, for your cleansing we give you praise and in order to live out your example we ask for your grace. We pray this in your name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.