

Humble Servant

Lesson 12

John 13:1-17

Opener

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never wrote a book.

He never held an office.

He never had a family or owned a house.

He didn't go to college.

He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born.

He did none of these things one usually associates with greatness.

He had no credentials but himself.

He was only 33 when public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.

(excerpt from "One Solitary Life," Author unknown)

Scripture

Then he poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel . . . "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (vv. 5, 14-15).

In the time of Jesus, it was normally the servant's job to wash the feet of the guests. Yet Jesus was the Master and he washed the feet of his followers.

Discussion

Ask: Why do you think Jesus chose to wash his disciples' feet?
What was he trying to teach them?

vv. 1-5

The amazing part of this passage is verse 3, when John tells us that "Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God." Then in verse 4 he says SO he got up and washed the disciples' feet. It seems backwards to the human perspective. If Jesus knew he had all authority, he should have made the disciples bow and worship him! But instead he chose to humble himself and be a servant.

This idea of Jesus humbling himself is expressed in Philippians 2:6-8.

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross.

So we see that Jesus not only humbled himself by becoming a man, but he became a *servant*. This was all part of God's plan—both to teach us and to save us. Only an extravagant amount of love for his children would allow God to send his Son in this manner.

Aren't we thankful that God chose to reveal himself as a gentle, loving Savior?

Although Jesus' ultimate act of love for us was to die on the cross, the washing of the disciples' feet was a precursor of that. Verse 1 tells us that Jesus "showed the disciples the full extent of his love" as he washed their feet. William Barclay states that "few incidents in the Gospel story so reveal the character of Jesus and so perfectly show his love" (*Barclay's Daily Study Bible*).

2 Corinthians 8:9 says of Jesus that "though he was very rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich." Jesus came to this earth, humbled himself and died so that we can have access to all of God's blessings.

vv. 5-17

Peter did not understand the deeper meaning of this foot-washing, and so he protested. He would not allow his Lord and Master to stoop to the level of a servant. But Jesus made it clear that this was a necessary part of his ministry and without it, Peter would not be a part of him.

Ask: Do we allow Jesus to have his way in our lives, or do we resist because what he asks us to do doesn't make sense?

It didn't make sense to Peter at the time for Jesus to wash his feet, but as Jesus told him, someday he would understand. It took faith to let Jesus perform this service.

The disciples must have looked back on the teachings of Jesus and realized what he was trying to do during his time on earth. And he wanted them—and us—to imitate his attitude and actions of love and humility. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus tries to teach them this attitude:

You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many.

Of course, this is completely opposite to the world's idea of greatness. But it is the best way.

Application

Jesus washed his disciples' feet to teach them the importance of servanthood. Yet it was also a symbol of their spiritual washing.

Ask: Have you allowed Jesus to wash away the unclean things in your life?

The first step is to trust Him as your Savior and Lord. Then he can wash away the sin in your heart.

In Isaiah 1:18, God tells his people: "No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool."

That is exactly what He wants to do for us. Even if we have accepted Christ, there may still be areas of our heart that we need to let him clean up.

Let the words of this old hymn be your prayer today:

Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole;
I want thee forever to live in my soul;
Break down every idol, cast out every foe;
Now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Whiter than snow, yes, whiter than snow;
Now wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.