

Servanthood

John 13:1-17

There were two boys in the Taylor family. The older decided that he must make a name for his family, and so turned his face toward the English Parliament and fame. The younger decided to give his life to the service of Christ and so turned his face toward China and duty. When Hudson Taylor, the missionary, died, he was beloved and known on every continent. But if you look up in an encyclopedia to see what the other son had done, the older brother, you will find these words, "The brother of Hudson Taylor."

Indeed, Jesus has said, "Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant." It's good to be reminded of that, as we most certainly are in our text this morning. The subject is servanthood, which is, in Jesus' estimation, the path to greatness. And there is one necessary characteristic for anyone who wishes to travel down that path, namely humility. The grace of humility. The virtue of humility. And perhaps more clearly here than in any other place, what we find in John 13 is that,

I. JESUS DEMONSTRATES THE HUMILITY OF SERVANTHOOD.

It is not a lesson he teaches his disciples with words, as if humility were a doctrine to be grasped intellectually. He doesn't even tell them about humility, but rather shows them.

v.1-5

Men frequently seek greatness in all the wrong ways. Remember the example of James and John, whose mother was sent to ask for the positions of greatness for her sons. We read in,

Mat. 20:25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those

who are great exercise authority over them. 26 "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 "And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- 28 "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

As Jesus says further,

Mat. 23:11 "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

And then again, immediately before that last passover, when Jesus had communion with his disciples in what is now called the Lord's Supper, do you remember the subject of conversation among the disciples? It was an argument.

Luke 22:24 Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. 25 And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' 26 "But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. 27 "For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves."

Amazingly, our text this morning comes just before that dispute arose, showing that those disciples completely missed the point of the lesson Jesus gave them. At least, initially. It was the lesson of humility. And servanthood.

Now, obviously the identity of a servant has to have reference to a master. A servant is one in humble submission to a master.

And Jesus shows that his master is his father in heaven. It is a relationship that we have seen many times before in our study of John's gospel. Everything Jesus did had reference to his father in heaven.

v.1-3

In general terms, then,

A. A servant knows his master.

He knows that he is a slave to his master. Thus, if you are going to claim to be a servant, you must, as part of that claim, demonstrate your submission to your master. And Jesus did that. Remember these verses in Philippians,

Phil. 2:5 "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men."

Jesus took the form of a bondservant. He willingly and freely gave up the rights that were his as God, he refused to demand his rights. Because he knew his master. His father.

And he loved his people.

B. A servant loves people.

Notice what it says in,

v.1

He love them to the end, to the utmost, literally as much as possible. He loved them to end, to the end of his ministry. Perhaps, even, the implication is that he loved them unto eternity. He loved his people, "his own who were in the world." His sheep. Or more technically, perhaps, the elect.

He loved those whom the father had given to him. He knew them, and he loved them. Jesus loved his people as much as he possibly could have. After all, he would lay down his life for them, wouldn't he?

John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

You will never be a servant unless you love people. Never. You will never find the motivation nor the strength to do works of service unless you learn to love people. And love them to the uttermost, as much as possible.

With that, don't ever forget that you have been loved in that way, by the greatest of all servants, Jesus, who showed us that,

C. A servant accepts menial tasks.

Here is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. Here is the real definition of servanthood. The willingness to do menial tasks.

Here is where is gets practical. Things like men washing the dishes after dinner. Without being asked! Things like taking out the garbage. Cleaning the bathrooms. Fixing something that is broken. Digging weeds out of the garden or mowing the lawn. Maybe shoveling the snow.

Illus: The story is told of a wise old minister who visited a great church, and asked an usher if he might meet the person responsible for the church. The usher took him to the pastor, but the old minister said, "No, this is not the man." Next the usher took him to meet the chairman of the church board, but again the minister said, "No, this is not the person." Perplexed, the usher then led the minister to the wealthiest man in the church, but again the answer was the same. Finally the old minister said to

the usher, "Take me to the kitchen." The usher was puzzled, but led the man down to the kitchen. There they found a modestly dressed woman in an apron, arms plunged into soapy water up to her elbows, cleaning dirty coffee cups and saucers. The old minister turned to the usher and said, "Here, my friend, is the real secret of your success. I have seen it in church after church."

What about Jesus?

v.4-5

John saw the whole thing, and records it with such thorough detail, in the natural language of an astonished and admiring eye-witness. Seven distinct things are named, seven actions of Jesus. He rose. Laid aside his garments. Took a towel. Girded himself. Poured water. Washed. And wiped.

And what was the significance of the feet washing? Well, Jesus and the disciples had come from Bethany, and their feet, protected only by sandals, had become partly exposed to sand and dust. They were dirty and uncomfortable. In such circumstances, the washing of the feet was customary. The host, though not himself performing this service, would generally see to it that it was performed. It was a menial task, a task to be discharged by a servant, the lowest of the servants.

Remember when John the Baptist had wanted to express his feelings of unworthiness in comparison to Christ. He could think of no better way to say it than to say he deemed himself unworthy of kneeling down in front of Jesus in order to unloose his sandal-straps and remove the sandals with a view to washing his master's feet. In other words, feet washing was the most humble task John could identify.

But here, in the upper room, there was no servant to do it.

Hence, one of the disciples should have performed this task. But evidently, none was willing. They were too proud, too concerned about who among them would be the greatest.

In the upper room, everything was ready. Here stood the pitcher and the wash-basin; there lay the long linen cloth. There was water in the pitcher. Yet no one stirred. Each disciple was hoping someone else would make the first move.

Jesus waited a long time. The disciples had already occupied their places around the U-shaped table. The food was on the table, and the meal was about to begin. Still no one offered to perform the duty of the servant. No one moved. Except Jesus.

v.4-5

I suspect everyone of you will have an opportunity soon, perhaps even today, to follow this example, this willingness to perform menial tasks. The only question is whether you will sit still like the apostles or rise from the table like Jesus.

You won't rise if you think that certain tasks, certain chores are below you or beneath you, and such thinking is a horrible temptation that we all face.

Learn from this example of our Lord, who so marvelously demonstrates the humility of servanthood. And then there is Peter.

v.6-11

I debated how to characterize all of that, and I chose the word "pride."

II. PETER DEMONSTRATES THE PRIDE WHICH CONTRADICTS SERVANTHOOD.

Pride. I believe that it was pride that caused Peter to refuse Jesus' offer to wash his feet. Such a task was beneath Jesus, he must have thought, since Jesus was his master. And it was beneath himself.

So he couldn't accept the offer, demonstrating that,

A. The proud refuse to accept mercy.

It's humbling to accept mercy, isn't it? It's humbling to accept gives--charity, as we call it today with a negative connotation. "I don't accept charity."

It's humbling to be the recipient of gifts. In my experience, I've known people who have left the church because money was given as a gift, money legitimately needed and offered in love. And after receiving the money, they left the church. The offer of mercy wounds the pride of a man.

That's what keeps many people from Christ. The pride of a man thinking, "I can take care of this myself." The pride of a man thinking he can restore and reform his own life, and then come to Christ with his own dignity intact. But you can't. It's humbling to ask for mercy. But, of course, we must. For it is the proud who are condemned.

Peter shows us such pride.

v.6

The meaning, with more emphasis, is, "You, my feet wash?" The very idea was intolerable. His words were a protest. Even rebellious. Built upon his pride.

v.8a

Posing as a false humility, it is such pride that refuses to

accept mercy. The pride that refuses to admit the need for mercy. And there, the pride that produces ignorance, ignorance Jesus himself identifies.

v.7

Peter is so ignorant here, so ignorant of the great spiritual lessons and blessings which Jesus is intending to portray. In general terms,

B. The proud fail to understand things of spiritual importance.

Pride is such a terrible thing. Look at what it produced in Peter.

v.8a

"Never." Literally, not in all eternity! Then Jesus answered again,

v.8b

To that, Peter impulsively blurts out more ignorant foolishness. v.9

But Jesus certainly had no intention of emphasizing the physical, as if a physical cleansing would somehow make a person a participant in his spiritual blessings! Thus Jesus spoke words of even greater spiritual significance to Peter. But he missed it all.

v.10-11

Now, what is Jesus saying? Follow closely.

First, the end of verse 8. There is a spiritual necessity to be washed! In symbolic language, going far beyond merely cleaning dirt of the feet, Jesus says, "Unless I clean you, you will be

separated from me.” “Unless I wash away your sins, you will be alienated from me in your guilt.” The foot washing is only part of Christ’s work, he must do the entire work of washing away your sins.

So Peter says, “Wash all of me.” And Jesus says, “I already have.”

v.10

Jesus is saying, “I have already washed you, already bathed you.” Jesus tells Peter that he is already clean, and Peter misses the whole point. He still needs the regular cleaning of the feet, the forgiveness of sins, but in general terms, he is already clean.

Thus the apostle Paul defines Christians with these words, referring to the sinfulness of unbelievers.

1 Cor. 6:11 “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

This is a great illustration for you to understand your relationship with God. If, by faith in Jesus Christ, you have been born again, if you have embraced Jesus Christ as your lord and savior, then you are clean! Washed. Bathed. Never again to face his condemnation.

But what happens when you sin? You don’t lose your salvation, although you do still need to be washed. Your feet need to be washed, not your whole body. You are still a Christian, but your sin still needs to be washed away.

I suspect Peter missed all of that! In his pride.

It really is a great lesson, and Jesus even draws into his words

the fact that he will be betrayed by one of the disciples, whom we know to be Judas.

v.10b-11

Judas was also mentioned in,

v.2

What marvelous symbolism. What marvelous wisdom and teaching. All of it in the context of Peter’s foolish and proud rejection of Jesus’ offer to wash his feet.

So what do we do with all of this? Jesus makes that clear, too!

III. ALL BELIEVERS ARE EXHORTED TO FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF SERVANTHOOD.

The application part of this sermon is easy. And very straightforward.

v.12-17

Jesus says, “Follow my example.”

Let me say, first of all, however, that he is not instituting any ordinance or sacrament that is binding upon the church such as baptism of the Lord’s Supper. Some groups and churches have interpreted it that way, and practice foot-washing as an act of worship, akin to the Lord’s Supper. Some groups, notably the Roman Catholic Church, carry over a superficial application of this by having the Pope do a token foot-washing each Easter. That’s not the intention.

Jesus is not commanding the disciples to do WHAT he has done, but has given them an EXAMPLE in order that they might do AS he has done. In other words, it isn’t the literal example of

washing feet that is to be copied, not the outward ritual, but the inner attitude of humility and servanthood.

Jesus uses the example of foot-washing to exhort us to be humble servants. And it is that spiritual sense which our Lord emphasizes. Specifically, his example defines servanthood for us.

A. Servanthood is voluntary humiliation.

That's what we are obliged to imitate--the voluntary humiliation of Jesus. Notice how Jesus describes it.

v.12

That will get their attention! Then,

v.13

There is a clear claim to deity, to divine authority. I am the Lord. You are correct in addressing me in that way. Then he uses an argument from the greater to the lessor,

v.14

If I am the Lord, if I am God, and I have humbled myself in this estate of humiliation, then you, as mere creatures, ought to be willing to do the same.

It is certainly the same lesson we had in Philippians 2, which I've already referred to,

Phil. 2:3 "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and

coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

Jesus humbled himself, even unto death. And he says to you and to me, "go and do likewise." For,

B. Servanthood is voluntary imitation.

Voluntary. That is, a choice of your own will. A decision or commitment that you make yourself.

Jesus says,

v.14b-15

And just so that no one could possibly say of himself, "That is below my dignity," Jesus says,

v.16

It wasn't below the dignity of Jesus to take the form of a bondservant, to humble himself in service to his people even unto death. It wasn't below his dignity to perform the most menial of all the tasks assigned to household slaves. There was nothing high and mighty in him.

And there must be nothing of that spirit in us! But how easily, how often it creeps in. How often it takes over! How often do we forget Jesus' words,

Mat. 10:24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master."

This is especially important for those in positions of rule and authority, leaders, whether in the home, church, workplace or government. The mandate from Jesus is clear.

Luke 22:25 [Jesus] said to his disciples, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ 26 “But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. 27 “For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.”

Jesus understood the great spiritual and eternal value of such humble service.

v.17

There is blessing, great blessing in humble service, and never is that made clearer than in the description of the final judgment at the glorious return of Jesus Christ.

Mat. 25:31 “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 “All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 “And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 ‘for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 ‘I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 ‘When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 ‘Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as

you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

Therefore Jesus would say to each one of you,
v.14-15

So please think in these terms, foot-washing. And look for ways in which you, in humility, can wash the feet of another. And that, my friends, is real Christianity.