

## Are You Greater Than Jesus? John 13:1-17

Are you greater than Jesus? What we would probably vehemently deny by our words, we often proclaim by our actions.

This week we complete our three week series entitled: Improving Your Serve. Next week we will begin a study of the New Testament book, 1 Corinthians. The first week I asked the question: Did you come to serve? Last week Phillip asked the questions: Do you think like a servant? This week the question is: Are you greater than Jesus?

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of John chapter 13 verses 1-17. John is the fourth book in the New Testament. We are going to look at something Jesus did and said on the night he was arrested by the Romans leading to his death by crucifixion. I'm going to start by reading verses 1-4 which explain what Jesus knew that informed his act of service. Read verses 1-4.

You'll notice that twice in these verses the Bible refers to Jesus knowing something that leads to him acting. What did Jesus know? First, he knew that his hour to die had come or as John states it, "Knowing that his hour had come that he should depart out of this world." John also tells us that Jesus loved his own who were in the world. Jesus had loved these disciples and demonstrated his love in countless ways. Because he knew he was about to die and because he had chosen to love these men, he decided to love them to the end. Jesus was going to leave this world on a final note of love for his disciples.

Everything Jesus does and endures in these last three days is the result of determining to actively love his followers. The foot washing was an act of love. The instruction was an act of love. Praying for them in Gethsemane was an act of love. Undergoing the arrest and whipping was an act of love. Dying on the cross was an act of love.

The Princess Bride illustrated that service is the language of love. Read Princess Bride story. Serving someone is another way of saying, "I love you." That is the point John is making in verse 1. Jesus' love for his disciples is what motivated him to serve them.

The second thing Jesus knew was that the Devil had already compromised Judas to betray him. The relevance of this piece of information will become apparent as we study the foot washing itself.

The third thing Jesus knows is his own identity. Specifically Jesus knows that the Father had given all things into his hands. He knows that the Father had sent him to the Earth. And he knows that he is going back to the Father. Putting that into other terms, Jesus knew his authority, his purpose, and his destiny.

Jesus knew his authority. He had it all. The Father had given all things into his hands. Jesus had authority over every person and over every aspect of creation that he encountered on the Earth. He had authority over Pilate, over the religious leaders, over Satan, over the Roman soldiers. If he wanted to command any of those to do something or not do something, he had the authority from God to do so. Jesus was no victim. He voluntarily went to the cross for you by his choice. He even told his disciples at one moment that if he wanted to, he could call on ten thousand angels to rescue him.

Jesus knew his purpose. He knew the Father had sent him to the Earth to become a sacrifice for mankind. As we heard two weeks ago, Jesus told his disciples, "For the Son of Man did not

come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for mankind.” Washing feet was part of his purpose of coming to serve.

Jesus knew his destiny. He knew he was going back to Heaven where he would sit at the right hand of the Father.

Knowing these three things is what motivated or enabled Jesus to wash his disciples’ feet. Notice that verse 3 and verse 4 are the same sentence. In fact, you could translate verse 3 as “Because he knew the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come forth from God, and was going to God, he rose from supper and girded himself with a towel.

Jesus was able to serve as he did because he knew these things and you can serve better if you know these things. I believe what we have here is the self-perception necessary to be a servant.

Know your authority. Serving others is challenging because it requires humility. Servants are not typically honored in any culture. Most people dismiss servants as unimportant people. That’s true in American culture. People get autographs from movie stars, not from maids. They seek interviews with winners, not with waiters. We all wrestle with serving because at times it seems “beneath us.” “Really, you want me to change diapers?” “Can’t you get someone else to collect the offering?” “What will people think of me if they see me cleaning out toilets?” If we’re not sure about our own value and worth, particularly if we have recently experienced some kind of defeat, it may be extremely hard to serve, because serving may reinforce that feeling that I’m really not worth much.”

As a believer in Jesus, your position is that you are in Christ. You are God’s son or daughter. You have the authority to ask for things in Jesus’ name. Your value and worth is determined by the fact that God loves you and has adopted you into his family. Whatever menial act of service you do will not change who you are as a child of God, your role as an ambassador of the Kingdom of Heaven, your calling as a witness to Jesus, and your status as a member of God’s elect. You can’t change here on earth what has already been established in heaven. Knowing that will help you serve.

Know your purpose. God has called you to serve. Servants often do not get rewarded or thanked. You may not be appreciated. Serving is hard because there are often few moments of praise mixed in with long intervals of relentless work. You’re working for God and he is the one responsible for rewarding your service. A well done from Jesus is worth more than a thousand thank yous because Jesus can elaborate on that well done and make it last forever.

Know your destiny. However demanding your service might be, whether you are providing care for an invalided parent or infant, the days of service will end, but the days of reward will not. Heaven and your reward await you. The temporary trials of service are transformed into the eternal ecstasies springing forth from God’s generous compensation. Even if your service is opposed by the harshest persecution, know that God will overload your take home pay. You have an inheritance waiting for you that is undefiled, uncorrupted, and reserved in Heaven for you. Remember these things as you serve. Jesus did.

Follow the example of Jesus who knew his authority, his purpose, and his destiny, and out of that knowledge chose to do what none of his other disciples had done, to wash their feet.

Jesus uses his foot washing example to serve a couple of purposes. One purpose was to teach spiritual truths through this object lesson. What spiritual truths did Jesus teach? Let’s read verses 5-11. Read.

Jesus probably started with Peter. The first indication that something else besides washing feet is going on comes with Peter’s question and Jesus’ answer. Peter asks, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Customarily a house servant washed the guests’ feet. Peter probably felt that it was

beneath Jesus to wash his disciples' feet. Someone else should be doing it. My guess is that Peter's tone was incredulous. "Lord, are you really going to wash my feet?"

Jesus' answer indicates something else is going on. Instead of answering, "Yes, Peter, I'm going to wash your feet," simple question, simple answer, Jesus instead says, "You are not going to realize what I'm doing now, but later you will understand."

I can imagine Peter thinking: "What do you mean I don't realize what you're doing? You're going to wash my feet. Doesn't take rocket science to figure that out. Peter would not actually have thought that last sentence literally, but something comparable in his culture.

Jesus is saying, "There's something more to this action, but you won't fully understand it until later. Probably not until after Jesus died and resurrected.

Peter probably feels strongly that Jesus should not have to wash Peter's feet. Maybe at this point Peter is even thinking he should be washing Jesus' feet. Peter says to Jesus, "Never shall you wash my feet."

Jesus' answer is even more puzzling. "If I do not wash you, you have no part in Me."

Again, I can only speculate as to what Peter may have thought. "What Lord, I've been with you for three years and you're saying that if I don't let you wash my feet, that all goes away? I won't have any part with you?" I'm sure Peter is greatly confused by this time. What in the world is Jesus talking about?

One thing about Peter that is strongly in his favor: he loved Jesus and he desperately wanted to be with him, so when Jesus insists that he must wash Peter's feet, then Peter wants to make doubly sure that he doesn't miss out. "Lord, if my stanky feet offend you, let's make sure nothing else in my body is a problem. Wash my hands and head too, everything not covered by cloth. I don't want to risk being separated from you. Clean everything you see."

Jesus' answer, at first, sounds entirely reasonable and literal. If a person has bathed and they travel to someone's home, they only need to wash their feet because their sandaled feet walking on dusty roads would have gotten dirty, but not the rest of their body. But then Jesus says they are all clean, but not all of you."

In verse 11 John helps us readers by explaining the reason all are not clean is because one of the disciples is going to betray Jesus. Now it becomes clear that the foot washing is an object lesson referring to sin and spiritual cleansing. Jesus conversation with Peter has really been about spiritual cleansing. If we read Jesus' words with that understanding we realize there is a deeper message. Jesus is using the customs of personal hygiene to make a point about forgiveness and spiritual cleansing.

Here is how I think the analogy works. Bathing represents the wholesale cleansing that occurs at salvation. Every past sin was forgiven at salvation so that you became spotlessly clean before God. You only need one spiritual bath in your life. However, as you walk the pathways of this life you accumulate dirt on your feet. You sin and become unclean. Jesus needs to wash your feet or cleanse you of those new sins. Your willingness to let Jesus clean your feet, acknowledging that they are indeed dirty and need cleansing, represent your repentance and confession of sin. If you refuse to confess your sins and don't let Jesus cleanse you, then you have no part with Jesus, meaning you have no fellowship with Jesus, your close relationship with him has been broken and remains that way until you willingly offer up your dirty self to his loving wash rag and towel. In Judas' case the foot washing wasn't going to help because Judas still needed the bath.

If you really want to be a servant like Jesus, then you need to be clean like Jesus. You need to call upon Jesus to save you, to bathe you completely, and thereafter when you dirty yourself

through disobedience to God, you need to let Jesus wash you clean again. Do you realize that every time Jesus forgives you and cleanses you, that he is actually serving you just as if he was washing your feet again? That is the measure of his love for you. He is constantly removing his outer cloak, taking up the basin and the towel to wash and wipe you clean. That is the kind of servant he is.

Being the wise lord he is, Jesus used his example for multiple purposes. Not only did he use it as an object lesson to teach the need for spiritual cleansing, but he also used his example as a model for the kind of service to which he calls his disciples. What lessons did Jesus teach from his example? Let's read verses 12-17. Read.

I have a lot of fun imagining what the disciples are thinking when they hear Jesus. So Jesus asks, "Do you know what I have done to you?" I imagine them looking at each other with bewildered looks and then one of them, maybe Peter, saying, "Yes, you washed our feet?"

Then Jesus goes into an argument from the greater to the lesser. If I am your Lord and teacher and I was willing to wash your feet, then you who are my disciples should wash one another's feet."

So, let's back up. As I said, the host, the owner of the house typically provided a servant to wash his guests' feet. If he had no servant then the lowest ranking member of the family would wash the guests' feet even up to the wife if there were no children. Jesus and his disciples have rented this upper room so either Jesus or one of the disciples must function as the host, but there are no servants available. You can probably guess the thoughts of the disciples in this situation. I'm not the owner of his house and I'm not the host. It's not my responsibility to arrange for the foot washing. In short, they are in a situation not covered by the customary rules. No one is clearly responsible for the foot washing and no one clearly qualifies as the servant. You have a situation with no clear cultural guidance as to who is to serve.

These are the types of situations where you find out who the true servants are: when some need requires meeting, but no one is responsible for meeting it. Whoever volunteers and steps forward is your servant.

None of the disciples step forward. How about you? Have you ever been in a situation where someone needed help or something needed to be done, but no one present was responsible or in charge. Did you step forward? In that moment you were administered one of the most accurate predictors of servanthood. Did you step forward?

Jesus stepped forward. He modeled what he expects from us. There was a need for cleaning stank feet and no one was responsible to do it and no one was stepping forward to do it. Jesus did it.

In verse 15 Jesus says that he gave them an example that they do as Jesus had done to them. Some have taken this very literally to the point of having foot washing services as part of the church's worship service. How do we apply this today? Was Jesus' goal the narrow goal of them washing each other's feet or was his goal that they serve one another in whatever way necessary to meet legitimate needs? His goal was the broader more inclusive one. Jesus wanted them to serve each other in whatever way that met people's needs without limiting it exclusively to washing feet.

In fact, foot washing is not a need nowadays. Most of us wear shoes and socks and we have very little occasion to walk on dusty ground. We drive in cars and compared to the first century disciples, our feet are pretty pampered. We don't need foot washing, but we might need transportation, we might need help moving things, we might need some meals cooked for us, we might need someone to come watch our children.

Verse 16 is the source of my sermon title: Are you greater than Jesus? A slave is not greater than his master. The one who is sent is not greater than the one sending him. By implication, a disciple of Jesus is not greater than Jesus. Since those things are true, we therefore should serve others.

Let me flip around what Jesus said. What is the only legitimate excuse not to serve? The only legitimate excuse not to serve is that you are greater than Jesus. Jesus had to serve, but if you are greater than Jesus, then maybe you don't have to serve. So, who here does not have to serve? Who has a legitimate excuse not to serve because you are greater than Jesus?

I understand that because of health reasons or physical or mental capacity that you may be severely limited in how you can serve. You may be limited to prayer or writing notes of encouragement on cards or online. You may be limited to using the phone or the computer. I understand that our capacities to serve vary from person to person. What I am forcefully advocating is that no Christian has a legitimate excuse to avoid all service.

However, it is not all duty. Look at verse 17. Read. God will bless you if you serve others. He will shower you with his divine favor. Different studies have shown that those who serve or help others gain a health benefit themselves in terms of enhanced physical and emotional health. It's a great feeling at the end of a day of hard work to know that you have made a real difference in someone's life.

I keep my eyes open as to who serves around here. I watch those who labor in relative obscurity. I notice who comes out to work days. I observed who showed up to muck out houses. I saw who stayed after the worship service to set up the Christmas decorations and then take them down. I've noticed that in particular there is one man, one couple who consistently shows up to serve. He is probably one of the smartest men in this room although you would not know it by how he conducts himself in humility with others. He was out mucking out houses. I've seen him and his wife at numerous workdays. He helped put up Christmas decorations. He is always helping set up and take down tables for congregational events and leadership events. I think his wife is as much a servant as him, but I have simply had more opportunity to observe him. He's up for a vote today as our next elder, Alan Strickland.

I've noticed that many of our greatest servants have a lot of mileage on them. They live as a model to our youth and younger generations that what matters in the Kingdom of God is not power or fame or prestige or position. What matters is being a servant.

If you love, then you will serve. You'll be a better servant if you understand your authority, your purpose and your destiny and if you remember that you're never greater than Jesus. Let's pray.