

## John 13:1-5, 12-17

<sup>13:1</sup> Before the Passover Festival, Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved those who were his own in the world, he loved them to the end.

<sup>2</sup>By the time the supper took place, the Devil had already put the idea into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

<sup>3</sup>Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God. <sup>4</sup>He got up from the supper and laid aside his outer garment. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

<sup>12</sup>After Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer garment, he reclined at the table again. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. <sup>13</sup>"You call me Teacher and Lord. You are right, because I am. <sup>14</sup>Now if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>Yes, I have given you an example so that you also would do just as I have done for you. <sup>16</sup>Amen, Amen, I tell you: A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

## Hands of Humility

### I.

He had planned the whole event down to the last detail. Reservations had been made well in advance. It was not just your local Applebee's, not that there's anything wrong with them. He had reserved their table at a restaurant with beautiful linen tablecloths, fine china, and champagne flutes.

The couple sat down and began to peruse the menu while they waited for their server. Ten minutes passed. Then 20. Nobody came, not even to offer them a glass of water. They were growing more and more impatient. They were really hungry.

But...they were celebrating their wedding anniversary. Since they were happily reminiscing, they decided not to make a big scene. When they had waited 30 minutes, the husband went to find somebody. Finding a person who looked like the maitre-d, he began to express his displeasure.

Just as he started, he was interrupted. "I'm sorry, sir, but my attention is needed at another table. I'll be with you in a moment." *That* was the last straw. He had been put off for the last time. He returned to the table, and with his wife, left in a huff.

Have you ever had a similar experience? Maybe it was at a retail store where the clerk paid no attention to you, or the hospital, and you felt as though the nursing staff was neglecting you. Maybe you have tried desperately to negotiate a reasonable time window for someone from one of the utilities to come make a service call at your house.

It seems, sometimes, that good service is hard to find. The internet has spawned all kinds of ratings systems to help you discover merchants who do a good job with their service, but it seems that most of the reviews are of customers who have horror stories.

Human beings depend on each other and our acts of service. Many of us have experience in one field or another—taxes, health care, home or auto repair, real estate, accounting, and all sorts of fields. People constantly seek out your help in *your* area, and *you* find yourself needing help from others in all sorts of other fields. Serving one another is crucial to our existence. Often it seems that *good* service is so rare we want to honor those who serve us well with generous tips or enthusiastic referrals.

If that's the case, certainly you will be ready to refer your friends and relatives to Jesus when you learn about the kind of service God provides. Maybe you'll even want to refer your enemies.

In tonight's text we heard that Jesus not only provided incomparable service to his disciples, but that he did it for *free*! He made no demands of payment. There was no pulling of rank. There were no excuses made. He was not condescending or patronizing. Jesus served his disciples with **Hands of Humility**.

## II.

Jesus had a lot on his mind that night. "Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father" (John 13:1, EHV). He knew! He knew ahead of time that within 24 hours he would lay down his life for the sins of the world. "By the time the supper took place, the Devil had already put the idea into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus" (John 13:2, EHV). He *knew* that Satan had prepared Judas to betray him. "Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands" (John 13:3, EHV). He knew that it was all on him. In complete omniscience and omnipotence he *knew* what all that meant. Yet rather than leveraging his full authority in a dazzling display of divine brilliance, Jesus exercised abject humility.

Jesus foresaw the cross he would endure; he was conscious of all the souls he would redeem. While his mind raced with anticipation of the pain of sin and the suffering of hell, his disciples were engaged in a petty argument over which one of them was the greatest! Can you imagine? How could they be so oblivious and insensitive of the needs of Jesus?

The quibbling carried over to the upper room. There they realized there was no servant on duty to wash their stinky feet before they celebrated the Passover. Who was going to do it? Which of the disciples would step up and volunteer?

I can imagine them all standing there with arms folded, glaring at one another. Since they had been arguing about which was the greatest, certainly none of them was going to be willing to stoop down and act like a servant. Not *one* of them reached for the basin.

Jesus once fed 5,000 people, but most of them never truly believed. The political elite in Jerusalem were plotting his death. Even his own disciples were arrogantly arguing about which of them was the greatest on the night before he knew he would die.

Who would have blamed Jesus if his anger and frustration had boiled over and he walked away? Who would have blamed him if he had said: "Forget it! These people don't deserve me. I've done enough for them already—it's time for me to think about myself."

Even *more* maddening—Jesus had settled this argument before. James and John had once sent their mother to advocate for them to sit on Jesus' right and left sides in heaven. Jesus taught them all then about how to be great: "Whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave" (Matthew 20:26-27, EHV).

On this particular Thursday evening, Jesus didn't opt for another lecture. He chose to model for them what humble service looks like. "He got up from the supper and laid aside his outer garment. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:4-5, EHV). Christ's love never wavered. Without a hint of frustration or exasperation, Jesus handled their pride with perfect patience. He overcame their arrogance with humble service. The King of creation who had all authority in heaven and on earth, bent his knee to serve his disciples with a task so menial that servants regularly jockeyed to avoid it. "Having loved those who were his own in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1, EHV).

## III.

Most of our Christian service falls short because we base it on the behavior of our neighbor. We shun people who don't agree with us. Doctors are slow to follow up on patients who are the most belligerent. When we order off the menu, make a scene, or ask for the dressing on the side, we might be labeled "difficult" and treated differently.

Inside our families, we tiptoe around the hothead and walk on eggshells around the

opinionated mother-in-law. Worse yet, we sinfully justify our poor Christian service by suggesting they had it coming because *they* were obnoxious. The irony, of course, is that while we justify *our* behavior by blaming our neighbor, *we're* the ones who are truly being obnoxious.

If Jesus based his service on the disciples' behavior, no one would have had their feet washed. No one would have had their sins forgiven because Jesus would have never made it to the cross! Jesus' humility stands out so much because it is *not* based on human behavior. Jesus' humility is based on God's love and grace. He serves us because he loves us. His perfect love is unconditional. Not *our* behavior, but *God's* love moved him to wrap the towel around his waist and wash their feet. He even washed Judas' feet—though he *knew* how Judas was about to repay him.

Jesus didn't walk out on his disciples. He didn't walk out on you, either. He came to serve you. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28, EHV).

Christ's obedient death served you well. It paid the ransom price for our pride and entitled attitude, for our obnoxious rank-pulling, for making people feel smaller, and for every shallow and insincere excuse we've offered to God for failure to serve. "The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7, EHV).

#### IV.

The disciples had a history of missing the point. After Jesus washed their feet, should they have felt some shame? Their disgraceful bickering had been laid low by Jesus' humble hands. Jesus wanted to do much more than shame their pride. He wanted to invite *them* to use their hands of humility. "Now if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>Yes, I have given you an example so that you also would do just as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15, EHV).

Jesus was their Lord and Teacher. By virtue of his office, he was their superior. He didn't wave his title in their faces. He didn't shove his superiority down their throats or use it to avoid humble service to anyone.

For us, washing someone else's feet means to show Jesus' love toward others. That's a kind of love that forgets to feel superior. It's a love that stoops to the lowliest of service and is blind to what it is doing or who it is serving. It is a love that serves freely, without counting the cost—a love so humble that it voluntarily serves. It is a love that doesn't bother to look for *human* recognition, but seeks, instead, the approval of God.

Jesus came to serve. The service he provides is incomparable and free. Jesus' humble death purifies us of our poor service. Jesus' humble hands satisfy God's holiness and provide us the motive to serve our neighbor.

So...listen to Christ's call and wash each other's feet. Love and serve your neighbor, as Jesus did, with humility. Humility permeated Jesus' life and teaching. God grant that his same attitude would rework your attitude, too. Ask "How can I serve?" and "Who can I serve?" For: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17, EHV).

Make use of your hands of humility. Amen.