

John 13:1-20

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back to John 13. I thought we'd spend the day together in John chapter 13.

! So if you come back later at evening worship, there'll be a bit of overlap in tonight's! I hope to talk to you this morning on the theme of serving. There are three ideas in this part of John 13 on that theme in the ministry of Jesus. The first thing that John, the Apostle, wants you to see this morning is the glory of the serving God. The glory of the serving God. I think it's really easy to think that Christianity is all about what we do for God, isn't it? It's all about our efforts. It's all about our good works.

But we see here that before we think about serving Jesus, we must meet the God who serves. We must meet the Jesus who serves. Jesus says in verse 13, if you look there, he says to the disciples, you call me teacher and Lord, and you're right. I am those things. I am your teacher. I am your Lord. But strangely, you must accept me as your servant as well.

And if you can sort of get your head into the times. This scene was a very inappropriate display of service, wasn't it? It would have been humiliating to wash feet like this. It would have been the lowest servant's job, a slave even. Jesus has arranged this private gathering, a private meal with his closest friends, his disciples, in this inner circle, in this upper room. There's no one there apart from Jesus and his disciples. And he's ordered them, hasn't he, to make preparations for this meal together. And so what is uncharacteristic about this meal and about the arrangements of this meal when they come in is that there are no servants. No servants to do the menial, undignified washing when they come into the room for the meal, getting the dirt and the muck, the animal muck off the sandaled men's feet. It's a strange omission in the host's plan. But it's intentional, isn't it? Because Jesus wants the role of the absent servant. And the disciples, they must have been very, very embarrassed, mustn't they? Peter refuses this service. But God, this is upside down altogether, isn't it?

Where being glorious is about going down in service. Part of God's glory is that he serves.

[3 : 10] Do you see in verse 1, Jesus knowing that his hour had come to depart out of the world to the Father, having loved his own, he loved them to the end. See, now that gives you the context of who Jesus is and who he knows himself to be, John tells us that Jesus was aware of the glory that was due to him after his death and resurrection. He was going back to the Father.

He was destined to rise in glory, to depart out of the world. That's how John puts it. You know, if this was me, I'd think, great. Finally, I get to leave this lot. Think of all that Jesus has had to put up with, hasn't it? All of the evil that he has seen. All of the messiness, all of the selfishness, all of the faithlessness, and the slowness to believe, all of the blindness.

Any of us would think, soon I'll be out of here. Just think when you're in that job, isn't it, that you've been doing for years, and finally you get to hand in your notice and leave.

Soon I'll be out of here. It's been three long years of training. His disciples have constant hassle, constant harassment, disappointment, and even betrayal. You'd expect him to think, finally, finally, I can hand in my notice. What a relief. Leave this lot and go to the glory of heaven and get what I deserve. But what strikes you is that no sooner, in the same breath almost in the text, is Jesus aware of his glory and where he is going, he stoops down to serve.

Look at verse 3. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given him all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and he was going back to God, rose from supper, laid aside the verbal garments. He begins the service. Jesus is conscious of where he's come from, of who he is, of his authority and his majesty. The Father has given all things into his hands, in full knowledge that he is Lord of all. He is the servant of them all. The glory of his service, it is that actually he is not a slave, is he? Jesus is not a slave. He is not your slave.

[5 : 50] Jesus is the sovereign. Jesus is the sovereign with all things placed in his hands. With the hands that the Father has placed all things into. In coming to serve, it is not that Jesus, as the Son of God, kind of empties himself of all of his dignity and his deity to serve men and women.

He doesn't stop being God ever, does he? But he adds to himself a human nature. Like Paul says in Philippians 2, he takes on the former servants. And if Jesus was just a man here, if he was just a human being, without a divine nature, if these were merely a man's hands washing their feet, well, that would be a very kind thing to do, wouldn't it? It would be a very kind thing for a master of a group of men to serve his disciples.

It would be a great example. But the hands that are doing the washing here are not the empty hands of a mere man. They are the full hands of the God man. The hands of the king. The ruling hands. The reigning hands. The hands with all things placed in there.

Firmly holding hands. The hands that if you touched it, you would kiss it, wouldn't you? And bow down to it.

But no sooner than Jesus is conscious of what is in his hands, of who he is and where he's going, his sovereign hands are our serving hands.

[7 : 34] This is the glory of his service, isn't it? Because he's an upside down kind of person. He is the God. When he thinks of glory, he thinks of service.

When he thinks of greatness, he thinks of service. On the eve of the worst suffering possible, he is other-centered, isn't he?

He doesn't look to his own things and to his own glory. He looks to the situation of others, of his dirty disciples. It's funny how John describes his service as Jesus goes to the cross eventually. Jesus, John uses this interesting phrase to describe the whole thing, the death of Jesus. He doesn't use negative language. He calls it in verse 1, The hour of his departure, or the hour had come to depart out of the world, to depart to glory, to greatness.

He's not trying to deny the horror of what is to come, or to sugarcoat it, but to show us the connection. The two ideas emerged in Jesus. The splendor of Jesus is his service, isn't it?

[8 : 47] The glory is his grit and his suffering. And then John, it's as if he slows the narrative down as Jesus washes the feet.

You get a description of each move, each motion. It's humble and it's glorious. It's considered, it's deliberate.

Glorious service. It's not just getting the job done as quickly as he can. John slowly pictures each moment from verse 4.

He rose from the sun. He laid aside his outer garments. Letting go of dignity. Taking a towel round the waist.

Then he poured water into a basin. He began to wash the disciples' feet. Then, verse 12, he puts his outer garments on and resumes his place.

[9 : 50] It feels almost ceremonial, doesn't it? It feels deeply symbolic. And considered and deliberate. As we slow down, you can feel, actually, that this act, this ceremony is representative.

It is symbolic of Jesus' whole life and his whole ministry. It describes it all, doesn't it? A symbolic picture of the journey that Jesus has come on into the world.

He begins knowing his glory and status in heaven. The word was with God and was God in the beginning.

But then, coming down and taking the form of a servant, he wraps himself in the clothes of his service. Humanity, not just a towel.

Putting on the clothes of humanity so that he can serve and that he can die. Washing the dirt from his people. Then rising again. Putting on other garments and resuming his place.

[10 : 56] Being clothed in glory again. In resurrection and ascension. And he resumes his place in that glory that he had with his Father from the very beginning.

As we slow down the picture, we glimpse the glory of the God who serves. Not only a man.

Knowing he is Lord of all, but he serves them all.

His sovereign hands are serving hands. And so, from his service, there are two applications for us up there this morning. The glory of the serving God means that Jesus' people are the served people.

Jesus' people are the served people. And that is the lesson that Peter has to learn here, isn't it?

Simon Peter has to learn that being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus is not first and foremost

about serving God.

But about him serving us. Peter doesn't get the opportunity to serve Jesus here, does he? Jesus serves Peter.

[12:11] Actually, he must serve Peter. He must serve us. When Jesus goes round washing their feet, he gets to Peter in verse 8.

And he says, no, you shall never wash my feet. In the original, it means something like, never in a million years will you do that for me, Peter.

Jesus, not in all eternity will you do that for me. The natural instinct is that we first relate to God by doing something for him.

If we do stuff, he'll listen to us, won't he? If we do good things and if we behave well, we'll belong to him. We'll get blessing from him. And if we haven't done those things, well, he's not interested unless we sort of try and make up for it another time.

If I do something wrong, I'll try and do three or four things right to cover over it. But Jesus says, that is not the kind of God that I am. And that is not who you are to be with me.

[13:16] Peter says, you're not going to wash my feet. And Jesus says, no, no, no, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me.

If I don't serve you, Peter, you have no share with me. There is no blessing for you. Not because you haven't done that for me, but because you refuse to let me serve you.

There is no place for you with me in my glory unless I serve you. Unless I humiliate myself for you. There is no glory for you.

There is no way. And that is a big hit on our self-esteem, isn't it? We find it very difficult to be served. If I let you do that for me, I'm admitting I can't do it for myself, aren't I?

I'm showing a bit of weakness there. I'm showing a bit of dependence that I need you, that I'm not okay. I'm not self-sufficient. I'm not on top of everything.

[14:30] You know what it's like when someone gives you a gift, isn't it? Do you ever get that uncomfortable feeling? You're in a coffee shop or a pub or whatever, and your friend's there. There's always that argument, isn't there?

I'll get this. I'll get this for you. No, no, no. Let me. Let me. Please. No, no. This is my route. No, let me. It goes on forever, doesn't it? We just can't stand to be served by people.

There's a pride there, isn't there? We hate being in someone's debt, even if it's just a latte. Jesus gets Peter and he says to him, you know, in my kingdom, pride is the great enemy of blessing. Pride is the great enemy of hope. Pride is the great enemy of having a share with me, of my cleansing for you. The only people who don't get a share with me are those who say, I don't need you, Jesus.

You're not going to do that for me. His grace offends us, doesn't it? And we refuse him. He says, you'll never get true esteem from me unless you're prepared to give it up.

[15:44] Unless I serve you, you have no share with me. Unless you say to Jesus, I have got nothing to give you. I can't pay.

You'll have to pay. I'll follow you, not so that I have to serve you first, but that you might serve me, Jesus.

I need you to serve me. And the only way that you can block God's blessing and cleansing is by trying to split that around and trying to earn it, isn't it?

The way to lose out on Jesus' glory is to work for it. Jesus says to you, you must let me be the one to cleanse you and to sort you out.

When you fail and you will and you realize how dirty you are, I'll be waiting. I'll be waiting for a towel in my hand, ready to serve you.

[16:46] You follow me and I will be serving you. And you've got to get used to that. You must learn to let me do that, says Jesus. It's upside down, isn't it? The glory of the serving God.

His people are the served people. And then lastly, and thirdly, Jesus' people are the serving people. Jesus' people are the serving people.

Jesus arranges this meal in the upper room. And he deliberately, I think, places the disciples in an awkward social situation. Because he's forgotten to get these servants, the ones who would normally not be part of the meal, but would do the peep washing as you came in.

The disciples themselves are left to work out the dirty foot problem, aren't they? When they come in the room, who's going to wash the peep? At the beginning of the meal, that's what you'd expect.

To have your feet clean. You'd be reclining at the table, almost lying down. And dirty feet around food isn't a good thing, is it? That's just a no-no.

[17 : 58] But awkwardly, none of the disciples have volunteered to do it themselves. It was beneath them. No one had done it.

They were too proud. They each look at the basin. John mentions the basin, doesn't he? And the water, Joe. And they think, well, that's not for me.

I'm not the servant. They were too proud to be served. And too proud to serve. Can you imagine this bunch of men in a room?

All the egos and the testosterone. They've been invited by the Lord, haven't they? They're feeling pretty good about themselves in this exclusive group.

They want to talk theology, maybe. They want to wrangle for closeness with Jesus. None of them had fought to break away from the group and wash the greed.

[19 : 00] So it's utterly crushing for them when Jesus himself does the kneeling. In being served, they are confronted with their own unwillingness to serve on them.

So verse 14. If I, then your Lord and teacher, wash your feet, you ought also to wash one another's. No servant is greater than his master. And it would be very, very difficult in that room as Jesus got down on his hands and knees for anyone to be on their high horse at that point.

The overwhelming feeling would have been utter humbling. An embarrassment of generosity, wouldn't it? Lord, what are you doing?

It would be very difficult to have been served by Jesus in such a lowly way and then not feel utterly humbled. And not to feel that you were wrong not to serve in the same way.

Because people who follow Jesus have been served radically by Jesus at the cross. They have had the worst mess and muck cleaned away by Jesus who suffers to do it.

[20 : 24] Worse than dirt on your feet. Dirt in your heart. The dirt of your sin. And so people who have been served by Jesus in that way, they will naturally become servants.

You would just sit in that room, wouldn't you? And not serving to belong to the group. I need to do it. I need to show me what to do.

But serving because the model has been set. And you'd be embarrassed, wouldn't you, not to follow because you've been served so generously by him. Jesus asks Peter in verse 12, do you understand what I have done to you?

And the word understand gets repeated here in verse 7. So, what I am doing you do not understand. But afterwards you will understand.

And then again in verse 12, do you understand what I have done to you? And John, that word gets repeated because that is the question that drives us serving people.

[21 : 34] Do you understand what I have done to you? Do you? Do you understand? Do you understand? Jesus said that Peter wouldn't really understand until after the cross and the resurrection.

And then he would understand. He would understand the significance of this active picture of Jesus' generous service. And when you understand what I have done to you, you will be able to do what you failed to do before we had dinner.

When we understand what Jesus has done to us, we will do to others what we never could have done before.

We become a serving people. Serving others is a matter of understanding, isn't it? Understanding how Jesus has served me.

What Jesus has done to us. It's not just academic, is it? The more we understand, the more we understand the gospel, the more we understand Christology, the more we understand the Bible, the better servants we become.

[22 : 52] It changes who we are. It changes how we act with others. It changes what we do with our money, our time, everything. And if we're bad servants, I'm a bad servant.

We can try harder, can't we? But as we try harder, we've got to keep going back to the gospel to understand. To learn Christology.

The study of Christ. The person of Christ. We might ask ourselves, how do I want to be treated? I'll treat others like that. That's kind of biblical, isn't it?

But here Jesus extends that law. Jesus wants us to say to ourselves, not just how do I want to be treated? I'll treat others like that.

But how does Jesus treat me? I'll treat others like that. My lack of service to get a towel in my hand, whatever that turns out to be, whatever the basin is in the room or in the church, is a symptom that if I'm honest, I don't understand.

[24 : 00] I don't understand as well as I should do what Jesus has done to me. If I struggle to serve, I need to think again, I need to understand again what Jesus has done.

If I'm cold and I'm harsh and I'm stingy with others, I need to grasp and understand the embarrassment of the generosity Jesus has shown me. Just hear how far Jesus goes with his service here.

Because the meal takes a dark turn near the end of this portion, doesn't it? Because after Jesus has finished washing all of the people in the room, there is one set of feet that is about to walk out and betray him.

Jesus has just washed Judas' feet. John doesn't make a big deal of it, but it's he. So Jesus quotes from Psalm 41, verse 18.

He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. That's talking about Judas, who has eaten the supper with them. So this is staggering, isn't it?

[25 : 11] Jesus has just washed the foot, literally, of the heel of the one who wants to stamp on him with his foot, figuratively speaking.

He wants to dig his heel into Jesus and grind him down into the floor. You know, when you stop stepping dog dirt, you've got to clean the shoes.

Judas' feet are like that for Jesus, aren't they? That heel, that foot. And Jesus even washes that heel. He even washes that foot.

He doesn't go around the room and then get to Judas and say, oh, oh Lord, not him. Not his foot. Not his heel. I won't serve him.

I won't serve her. He kneels before his betrayer. And he serves him. He even says to his enemy, I am your servant.

[26 : 14] And Judas can't stand it, can he? You'll see this tonight. Judas can't stand the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. His pride can't stand it. And it's at this moment that he leaves the room.

This is the model. We are to inwardly say to each other, I am your servant. Once you've been served by Jesus, you're tripping over each other, aren't you, in the room with Jesus to get to the washbasin.

Knocking it over, trying to get it to serve others. We should be falling over each other, shouldn't we? Asking, who can I serve? Where can I serve?

Let me serve. Let me understand how he has served me. And let me be like the Apostle Paul who calls himself a slave of Christ.

Let me be a slave to the servant. Martin Luther King Jr. said, anybody can be great because anybody can serve.

[27 : 19] So right, wasn't he? Because he understands something of the glory of God and of his kingdom and his people. Greatness in his mind is upside down. In full knowledge that he is Lord of all, he serves them all.

And the hands that hold all things clean the dirty feet. They clean the heels, even of his enemy. And he comes to serve you at the cross and clean you.

And unless you trust him to do that, unless you say, yes, Lord, I need you to clean me. You can't have a part in him. If you refuse the God who serves you, you'll go through life, actually, even if you're in church, you'll go through life looking at the basin and saying, that's not for me, is it?

I'm not the serpent. You'll not want to serve others. You'll come to other people and certain people and you'll say, oh, it's not him, Lord.

Not her, Lord. Not his people. Jesus reminds us, we, the servants, are greater than the master, are we? And we need to understand again and again what he has done to us.

[28 : 41] Serving people as the servant. We pray together. Amen.