

This summer, I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled “Meeting Jesus,” in which I am looking through the gospel of John at the interactions of various people with Jesus, in order to discover who Jesus is and what it means to know and follow Him. Last week, we looked at Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11. After that, his public ministry is over, as the Pharisees have decided to arrest him next time he is in Jerusalem. But in John 13, the time has finally come for Jesus to come to Jerusalem, where he will eventually be betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified. And he begins this momentous week by doing something completely unexpected with his disciples.

John 13:1-17 - *It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. ² The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and **was returning to God**; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ "No," said Peter, "you **shall never wash my feet**." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰ Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. ¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and **returned to his place**. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

This surprising event that kicks off Jesus' week in Jerusalem centers around Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. As you can imagine, in Jesus' day, the roads were pretty disgusting, and those walking with sandals would get all kinds of dirty and disgusting things on their feet. **In those days, footwashing was the job of a servant; in fact, it was such a menial job that not even a Jewish slave could be required to do it.** It was reserved for Gentile, non-Jewish slaves. Nevertheless, Jesus shows his

disciples his love for them by taking off his outer clothing, wrapping a towel around his waist, taking the posture of a servant, and washing their feet. And as we read the rest of the passage, we find there is both an exemplary meaning and a symbolic meaning to what he is doing. On the one hand, Jesus is washing their feet in order to give them an example to follow. But on the other hand, this is not really about washing feet, but rather points us to something greater. Let's start with the exemplary meaning by reading again Jesus' explanation of what He has just done:

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

He tells them that he has washed their feet as an example of how to love and serve others. I think we learn four things from Jesus' example about what it means to love another person:

1) Love means serving others, including doing the most menial tasks

Although Jesus washed their feet, I want to encourage you to focus on the heart of what he is doing and not the form. This is because washing feet today doesn't have quite the same meaning as it did back then. The heart of the matter is that Jesus is teaching them to humbly serve others, even if it means getting dirty or messy or laying down your pride. Jesus points out to his disciples that even though He is both teacher, rabbi, and Lord, it is not beneath him to serve them in the most menial way possible. And as Jesus points out, we are not greater than He is. If the Lord does that, then those who serve Him are to do that as well. The call is to humbly serve as He has served, to be willing to get dirty or messy in order to bless others.

This is a common theme in Jesus' life:

Luke 22:24-27 - *Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵ Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷ For*

who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Washing feet was dirty business. To love someone is to get involved in their mess, to be willing to enter into the mess of their lives. Love means washing feet. Your home is a mess? Let me help you clean it. Your family is chaotic? Let me enter in to help. Your life is falling apart? Let me serve you.

Philippians 2:5-8 - *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!*

2) Love is an action more than an emotion

Let's face it: most of what we call love today is feelings-based. When I googled "What is love," the first results gave me song lyrics, but after that, the first site I found, Theconversation.com, described love this way:

"Love is an emotion that keeps people bonded and committed to one another."

Love, according to our world, is primarily an emotion. I love something or someone because of how it makes me feel or because I am attracted to it or them. I love you because you make me feel good about myself. And when you no longer make me feel good, or I'm no longer attracted to you, that means I no longer love you. This is certainly a very emotion-driven, self-centered definition of love.

But in this passage Jesus, the Son of God, shows the full extent of His love, and it is washing feet. For most people, there is nothing attractive about feet. But even though there is nothing attractive about feet, and plenty to be repulsed by, Jesus washes their feet anyways, serving them out of love, not based on emotional desire or attraction.

We treat people with love not because we are attracted to them or because of how they make us feel, but because love means serving another person, doing something for their benefit, meeting another's need. Remember the love chapter:

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 - *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the*

truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

Love is primarily an action. It is treating someone with patience, kindness, a lack of envy, without boasting or pride. It means not being rude, self-seeking, not easily angered, and not keeping a record of wrongs. Love means not delighting in evil but rejoicing with the truth. To love someone is to protect, to trust, to hope, and to persevere. **If love is an action, that means that I can love someone even when I don't feel like I am "in love" with them.** I can be kind, and forgive, I can be gentle, and serve, regardless of how I feel about the other person. I think some of you need to be reminded of that, that even when the feeling is not there, you can still love. Love is washing feet.

3) Love means serving without concern for what you get in return

Jesus was not looking for anything in return from his disciples, and in fact, he was not going to get much positive back from them over the coming week. His desire is that they would serve others the way He was serving them. Love means serving, doing the mundane, the quiet, the overlooked, the difficult, the sacrificial thing, even if you are not appreciated, or served in return. Don't just love and serve in order to get something back. Don't just give in order to put people in your debt. Don't just do your good works in order to be seen by others. Jesus warned against this:

Matthew 6:1-4 - *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your **left hand know** what your **right hand** is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

What a challenge, to give in such a way that we're not even keeping score ourselves of what we have done for others. We serve to bless others, not to boost our own ego. We give without an expectation of getting anything in return:

Luke 14:12-14 - *Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be*

blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Some of you, whether or not you know it, serve others in order to get something in return. You keep score of whether they return the favor, or show appreciation. But Jesus shows us that the way of love is serving without concern for what you get in return.

Elizabeth Elliot often told a story that, although it might sound Biblical, is a fictional story, yet has a profound meaning. The story goes like this:

Jesus was walking one day with His disciples and He asked each of them to pick up a stone and carry it for Him. They all picked up stones, some bigger, some smaller. Peter picked up the smallest stone possible and placed it in his pocket. They traveled for several hours, arriving at the next town tired and hungry. Jesus immediately turned the stones into bread and said, "Eat up."

Of course, Peter grew very frustrated knowing that his small stone was only now a munchkin. Jesus again asked His disciples to pick up another stone and carry it for Him. Peter, being a quick learner, picked up a large boulder and placed it on his shoulder and he, Jesus and the disciples traveled to the next town. This time, arriving at a river bank and more tired and more hungry than before, Jesus calmly asked them to throw their stones into the river, which they at once did in obedience to His command. They looked at Him, waiting expectantly for the stones to be turned into bread. Only this time, Jesus did nothing. When Peter and the disciples began to grumble, Jesus said with great compassion, "For whom did you carry the stone?"

Why are you serving? Why do you give? Who is it really for? Love means serving without concern for what you will get in return.

Feeling challenged yet? It gets even harder:

4) Love involves serving even your enemies

Jesus washes all of the disciples' feet, including Judas, who will betray him, and Peter, who will deny knowing him, and every other disciple there who will abandon him in the hour of His greatest need. There's an incredible line near the beginning:

John 13:3-4 - *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.*

Jesus has the power to do anything, and knowing that the one who will betray Him is sitting at the table with him, does not destroy him, but instead washes his feet. Love means serving even your enemies.

Luke 6:27-36 - *"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

And as Paul put it:

Romans 12:17-21 - *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

I don't know if you have people that you would consider enemies. Maybe you just have people that you really don't like right now. What would it take for you to put Jesus' words into practice, to love, do good, bless, and pray for them? To turn the cheek, give to all who ask of you, and to do to them as you would have them do to you?

That is the high calling of love. To serve others, even your enemies, including doing the most menial tasks, even when you don't feel like it, without concern for

what you get in return. Now go and do likewise. Really? Impossible. How can we possibly find the power to live and love like that? Thankfully, there is a deeper meaning to this passage:

The symbolic meaning:

In v. 6-11, he has an exchange with Peter, which helps us to understand the deeper meaning behind this act:

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"
⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."
⁸ "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."
⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"
¹⁰ Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."

Jesus, who is about to be betrayed and crucified, decides to show his disciples his love for them by washing their feet. Peter sees what he is doing and is horrified. And Jesus tells him that later he will understand what he is doing, and then **tells him that unless he is washed by Jesus, he has no part in him.**

Being washed by Jesus is a symbol of being cleansed of sin, so that we might be right with God. Jesus tells Peter that unless he washes him, Peter will have no part with him. Unless I wash you and remove your sin, you do not belong to me, and you are not clean.

Romans 6:1-5 - *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*

Baptism is a symbolic act by which we identify with Christ's death, dying to our sins and being raised to new life in Christ as our sins are washed away. Unless your sins have been washed away by Jesus, you are still unclean, still separated from a holy God. But in Jesus, there is forgiveness for every sin:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - *Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Paul tells the Corinthians that it doesn't matter what you have done. Full forgiveness and cleansing are available to all in Jesus because of His death on the cross that pays the penalty for our sins. Give your life to Christ, and be baptized.

Back to John 13. Peter continues:

⁹ *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰ Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."*

What does Jesus mean by this? When we trust in Jesus, we are cleansed once-for-all of our sins, past, present, and future. But as long as we are in this world, there is a need for ongoing confession.

1 John 1:9 - 2:2 - *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. ^{NIV} **1 John 2:1** My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, whose death pays the penalty we deserved once and for all. But there is still a need for ongoing confession so that God might continue to purify us.

So, in John 13, Jesus gives us a vivid picture of what love looks like. To love is to serve others, even your enemies, including doing the most menial tasks, even when you don't feel like it, without concern for what you get in return. But how can we live that out when we are so full of pride, fear, and self-centeredness? How can we love like Jesus when our pride keeps us from humiliating ourselves, when our fear of being taken advantage of keeps us from putting ourselves in a position of service, and our self-centered hearts wants others to serve us?

Where do you find the ability to love and serve others like Jesus?

Go back to v. 3-4:

³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

Interesting. Jesus knows that He is from God. He knows God has given Him total authority. And He knows He is returning to God. And so, He serves. He knows that He is from God: His value and identity are settled. He knows that God has given Him total authority: His purpose is settled. And He knows that He is returning to God: He has nothing to prove, and nothing He can lose that God would replace with something greater for all eternity. His identity is settled. He knows who He is, and He knows who He belongs to, and so He serves without concern for what they might do to Him.

Why is it so hard for us to love like Jesus? Our pride, fears, and self-centeredness keep us from serving in this way. But Jesus shows us that when we know our value, our purpose, and our identity in Christ, we belong to Him and are free to serve others. When we see Jesus dying for us, washing us by His death, then we know that we are loved. We know that our value and identity is settled. We know that we have a heavenly Father who cares for us, who protects us, who is the judge. And so we can love others and leave the judgment and the reward to Him.

How do we serve like Jesus? I think this is the key. When you truly get the gospel and understand His love, that it's not really about footwashing but about Jesus dying on the cross for your sins, then you will begin to love others not because they deserve it, but because HE deserves it. Even if your spouse does not deserve your love, HE deserves it, so love your spouse unto Him. Even if your children or your parents do not deserve your love, HE deserves it, so love them unto Him. Love others as He has loved you. Serve others as He has served you, to bring Him glory, because He is worthy. He died for you, so that you can lay down your life for others. Go and love others as He has loved you. Who is God calling you to love in this way today?