

The Divine Dignity of Humble Service (John 13:1-20)

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What would you do if you knew you had less than 48 hours to live? How would you spend your time? Would you shop for something you always wanted or travel somewhere you always hoped to visit? Would you throw a big party and surround yourself with the people you love? Or would you turn inward and isolate yourself? Would your last 48 hours look any different than the rest of your life or would you keep on living the same way you've always lived?

Few of us know the measure of our days. It's one of the many God-given limitations of being a creature. Jesus' experience as God incarnate was different. Jn 13:1 tells us Jesus "knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world." After some three years of public ministry, he had less than 48 hours to live. His disciples didn't know it. Nor did the Jewish people and their religious leaders. But Jesus did. The mission the Father sent him to accomplish was nearly finished. It was time to go home.

Ch 13 is a significant turning point in John's gospel. It marks the end of 12 chapters of public ministry known as the "Book of Signs" where Jesus performs a series of seven miracles or signs testifying to the truth of his divine identity. And it's the beginning of 9 chapters known as the "Book of Glory" culminating in the triumph of his death and resurrection.

At the time, of course, Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion didn't seem glorious at all. It seemed like the end of the line. The Messiah isn't supposed to die at the hands of his enemies. He's supposed to conquer and destroy them! Jesus spends the next 5 chapters explaining what's about to happen in a long conversation with disciples known as the Farewell Discourse. They still don't get it. V. 7, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."

The fact that Jesus wanted to spend the final hours of his life on earth with his closest followers isn't surprising. Nothing could have prepared them, however, for the scandal of what he did at the very beginning of the conversation. With less than 48 hours to live, he lays down his life, as he had from the beginning of his ministry, in an act of humble service. In the process, he displays the depth of his love, exposes the height of our pride, and sets an example for us to follow.

1) JESUS' ACT OF HUMBLE SERVICE DISPLAYS THE DEPTH OF HIS LOVE (vv. 1-5)

We do well to linger for a moment on what compelled the Lord to do and say everything that follows v. 1, not only in Ch. 13, but in the entire Book of Glory. V. 1, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." None of Jesus' actions are compelled by a joyless sense of duty or obligation. They are fueled by holy love, a love that flows from him to us not because we are lovely but because he is loving.

Yes, there is a sense in which God loves the whole world. Through the testimony of his people, he proclaims the free offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth! But the Lord's redeeming, covenant-keeping love is reserved for his chosen people. We are the object of his particular affection. And I have good news for you, Christian. There is a persistent, persevering quality to the Savior's love for you.

Loving someone "to the end" is exceedingly hard. It's easier to find a new spouse, a new friend, or a new church, then it is to hang in there for the long haul. And that's where God's love parts ways with our own. If you are in Christ, Jesus' love for you will not fail, fade, or lose momentum. He will not put you on relational probation or file for separation. He doesn't love you on a whim or because it's convenient.

He endured to the point of death itself to love you, to cleanse you from sin, to make you righteous, to bring you home to God! He will never forsake you. He knew you, sins and weaknesses included, before you were born. Your failures do not surprise him or make him regret his decision. He freely and joyfully loves his people to the end.

The details John gives us in vv. 2-3 only magnify the depth of the Lord's love. One of his own disciples, Judas, is about to betray him, instigated by Satan. In fact, when Ch. 13 opens, Judas is sitting at the dinner table with Jesus. The sacrificial love he's about to demonstrate isn't limited to his friend. It includes his enemies.

But John doesn't stop with describing who Jesus chose to love. He also reminds us of who Jesus himself is. In that moment, as they all sat around the table preparing to eat, Jesus "knew that the Father had given all things into his hands." He is fully conscious of his personal and absolute authority over the entire cosmos. He isn't blind or unaware of his greatness or glory. He knows there is no one in heaven or on earth greater than him.

Nor is he ignorant of his eternally divine nature. He also knew “he had come from God.” No one else at the table could say that. You can’t say that. There is no other human being who can say what Jesus said in Jn 10:30 – “I and the Father are one?” We bear God’s image, but we have not come from God as our Lord did.

Jesus also knew he was “going back to God.” The future – though unspeakably painful – was not dark to his understanding. He didn’t see the cross and nothing else. He knew glory was coming. He knew the Father was about to highly exalt him and bestow on him “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” Heaven was his throne. Earth was his footstool. And he knew it. He created the men reclining around him. And in that very moment, it was he who continued to give life to their mortal bodies and hold the entire universe together by the word of his power.

So what did he do? He did something that no self-respecting Jewish man would ever have done. It was a task so menial, so degrading, that some considered it beneath the dignity even of household servants and reserved the work for slaves. But there were no servants or slaves in the room. It was just Jesus and his twelve disciples. It was a customary expression of hospitality, but none of the twelve offered to do it. It was socially unthinkable. So Jesus did.

V. 4, “He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet...” The King of Glory knelt behind each one of them, rubbing off the dust, and dirt, and dung that filled the streets with his own hands. Then he wiped and dried them with the towel around his waist. He washed them. He made them clean.

It was a stunning act of humility. Yet Jesus did it freely and joyfully. Why? Because he didn’t come to be served but to serve. He didn’t come to save his life. He came to lay it down of his own accord. He didn’t come to acquire power, honor, or glory in the eyes of man. He came to declare and demonstrate the kingdom of God. He wasn’t seeking the approval of men. It didn’t matter whether people thought it was “respectable” or not. His disciples had a need, so Jesus loved them at the point of their need.

And in so doing, he defined true love. Real love, God's love, is displayed in humble, sacrificial service, the same sacrificial service that would lead Jesus in less than 48 hours to the cross, where the One who washed our feet died to cleanse our souls. It was a powerfully prophetic act, reflecting the pattern of his entire ministry. It pointed forward to the death he was about to die as the Servant of the Lord par excellence. And at least one of his disciples would have none of it.

2) JESUS' ACT OF HUMBLE SERVICE EXPOSES THE HEIGHT OF OUR PRIDE (vv. 6-11)

Look at Peter's response when Jesus comes to him in v. 6. "Lord, do you wash my feet?" In his mind, something is terribly wrong. If anyone should not be washing feet, it's Jesus. It makes no sense. It's beneath your dignity, Lord. Would the president wait tables at a state dinner? Would a 5-star general clean the barrack toilets? Peter is incredulous. Jesus gently assures him that one day he will understand the significance of what the Lord's doing. Peter stubbornly refuses. V. 8, "You shall never wash my feet."

Up to this point, we might think his reluctance is motivated by a deep respect for Jesus' honor and dignity. The stammering question in v. 6 suggests as much. But his outright refusal in v. 8, his unwillingness to let Jesus serve him, reveals something deeper is going on. Jesus knows it and warns Peter accordingly. V. 8, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." What does that mean?

Friend, the core message of the gospel is an offense to human pride. The gospel says we are sinners. Every one of us, not just Hitler or Stalin, deserves the righteous judgment of God on account of our rebellion against his authority. We need someone to save us.

You can't create life for yourself by keeping all the rules or breaking all the rules. You are utterly powerless to make right what our sin has made wrong, whether in you or around you. Only God himself can give you spiritual life. You need Jesus to wash you. You need Jesus to cleanse you. You need him to do for you what you cannot do for yourself, even in part. And that's really humbling because we don't like needing help.

Have you ever seen a young child angrily insist on doing something themselves even when they are utterly incapable of pouring the milk, turning their pants inside



out, or tying their own shoes? On one level, it's fun to watch. On another level, it's sad because it shows how all of us, from our earliest years onward, would rather serve someone else than allow them to serve us. We don't like being dependent.

A little support here and there? Sure. But admitting the moral stain of my sin is so great that I need God to die for me, in my place, so that I can be forgiven? Confessing that I don't deserve it, that I could never earn it, and that I am totally and completely dependent on his mercy? That's downright unamerican.

Yet that's exactly what biblical repentance requires. Faith in Jesus doesn't say, "I'm basically good and need God to fix a few of my problems." Faith in Jesus says, "Lord, I am completely lost apart from you. I need you to wash me. I need you to cleanse me." And if you are unwilling to do that, to come to Jesus in poverty of spirit and cast yourself wholly and completely on him, then you do not (and cannot) have any part in the saving work of Christ because God's grace is reserved for the humble.

Jesus recognized the human pride behind Peter's refusal. So he warns him because he loves him. "Peter, unless you humble yourself by allowing me to serve you, you cannot enter the kingdom of God." Typical Peter, in response to Jesus' warning he swings in the complete opposite direction. V. 9, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" He clearly has yet to grasp the full spiritual significance of Jesus' words. All he knows is that he wants to be with Jesus! Whatever it takes, count me in!

The Lord makes a profoundly important point in response. V. 10, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean." If you take a shower and then stroll across a dirty street in sandals, do you need another shower? No. You're already clean. Only the part of you that got dirty, your feet, needs to be washed. The same principle holds true spiritually.

When Jesus cleanses your soul through faith in the power of his blood shed for you on the cross, you are completely cleansed from the guilt of sin and eternally so! 1 Cor 6:11, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." Ps 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

And yet John says to his fellow believers in 1 Jn 1:9, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"?

So have we been washed, or do we still need to be washed? What's the answer? Yes! Even though we have been cleansed once for all from the guilt of our sin – past, present, and future – we still sin! We still go our own way instead of God's way.

And when the Spirit graciously convicts us, what do we need? We need the purifying power of who Jesus is and what he did for us on the cross to come to bear in that particular area of our life – not to avoid condemnation in the courtroom of heaven, but so we might become what King Jesus has already declared us to be – righteous as he is righteous. We need to know experientially what is already true positionally.

J.C. Ryle, "We learn that even those who are cleansed and forgiven need a daily application to the blood of Christ for daily pardon. We cannot pass through this evil world without defilement. There is not a day in our lives but we fail and come short in many things, and need fresh supplies of mercy."

The Lord is eager to give it! The question is whether we will humbly confess our need – at work, at home, in our relationships with our friends, our spouse, our kids – or choose to hold onto our spiritual pride and try to save ourselves. Thanks be to God he is more than able to cleanse us from that sin too!

3) JESUS' ACT OF HUMBLE SERVICE SETS AN EXAMPLE FOR US TO FOLLOW (vv. 12-20)

After demonstrating the depth of his sacrificial love and reminding his disciples of their need, Jesus instructs us to follow his example. V. 14, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."

Does he mean we should cleanse one another from sin the way he does? No. Washing their feet, in a symbolic sense, represented a life of selfless service to the people around him. Following him means doing the same. It means sacrificially serving one another in the same way he has served us. It means embracing humble servanthood not as an occasional good work, but as the rule and pattern for our life.

The principle itself isn't hard to understand. The challenge is applying it and application starts with honest evaluation. So be honest. When you see another



person, especially the people that are closest to you, are you more focused on how they could meet your needs or how you could meet their needs? Is your life oriented toward serving other people or serving yourself? What would your friends say? What would your spouse say? What would your kids say?

I think few of us would categorically refuse to serve anyone but ourselves. But how quickly we place limits on what we are willing to do for one another. I'll take a meal to another family at church...as long as it's convenient. I'll practice hospitality and have someone over for dinner...once the kids learn to behave or life is less busy. I'll spend time with that friend...as long as they never say anything hurtful. I'll participate in the life of my community group...as long as it fits nicely in my schedule. I'll play with the kids...when I feel like I have energy. I'll spend my day off giving my wife a break...as long as I get a little something before bed that night. I'll serve on a ministry team in the church...as long as it matches my unique gifts and doesn't feel like work.

Is any act of love too menial or sacrificial for you, friend? When you see a need, do you immediately think, "That's not my job!" or, "How can I help?" Even if it costs you dearly? Even if other people think, "You deserve better" or "That's beneath you" or "Why would you let them take advantage of you. Stand up for yourself!" I'm not discounting the wisdom of relational boundaries. I'm saying we need to feel the moral force of Jesus' example, especially in the way we lay down our lives for one another in the church.

No act of humble service, his own death included, was too great or too costly for Jesus. If we refuse to sacrificially serve others, especially the people closest to us, we are functionally saying we are greater than him when in reality he is infinitely greater than us. If washing his disciples' feet was not "beneath" the dignity of our Lord, why would we consider any act of humble service as "beneath" our own? Through his own example, Jesus dignifies sacrificial labor in a complete reversal of the world's definition of true greatness. And if we're going to follow a Servant King, we should cheerfully expect to do likewise.

The world looks to the CEO of a Fortune 500 company as the standard. Jesus points to a mom caring for 3 young children. The world looks to an athlete performing at an elite level. Jesus points to a dad loving his disabled adult son. The world looks to how much money you've made. Jesus points to how much money you have given

away, to the suffering saints for whom you have prayed, and the men and women you have built up through a timely word of spiritual encouragement.

Washing feet, in all manner of practical ways, usually won't cause other people to recognize you or make you the subject of a bestselling biography. You may not even get a single word of thanks! Then again, whose glory are we living for? The glory that comes from men or the glory that comes from the only God? Who are we trying to please?

There is an inescapably cruciform character to the path of faithful obedience to God. Sometimes we think, "If I'm doing what God wants me to do, why is it so hard?" Jesus replies, "The path of dying to yourself, laying down your life for others, is the only path that leads home to heaven. It's the path I myself walked before you. And I am more than able to empower you by the Spirit to do the same." It's easy to live with a sense of entitlement as a relational consumer, even in the church. Jesus' example compels us to embrace a life characterized by humble service.

CONCLUSION

Brothers and sisters, obeying the Lord's word to us in Jn 13 requires humility in two directions. First, it requires a humility that is willing for the Lord to serve us and receives his help through the people he sends to care for us. Whenever we resist help from a brother or sister in Christ by hiding our troubles or refusing their support or counsel, we are functionally stiff-arming God himself, Father and Son included. V. 20, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."

Second, it requires a humility that considers no act of sacrificial love too great, too small, or too costly. And if, like me, you struggle to lay down your life for others the way Jesus lays down his life for us, remember this. He doesn't just set the example. He frees us to practice the same kind of love toward one another by lavishing his sacrificial love on us. No motivation, no wellspring of sacrificial love for your fellow man is greater or more powerful than experiencing Jesus' sacrificial love for you.

If you want to grow in being a humble servant, meditate long and hard on the way King Jesus has served you – when it was anything but convenient, when you deserved the exact opposite. Why? So that we could experience the joy of loving him and one another not as the world loves, but as God himself loves.



1 Jn 4:7-9, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him."

Experiencing Jesus' sacrificial love frees us to practice the same. That's the goal. That's why Jesus did what he did. May that be our reputation in this community, brothers and sisters. May we be known as a people who make much of the Savior who loves us through the way we love one another. May we resist the temptation to become a church of consumers and choose to be a people who joyfully walk in the footsteps of our Servant King. V. 17, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."