

Having the Mind of the Master Servant. John 13:1-17

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"A large group of European pastors came to one of D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But of course this was America and there were no hall servants."

"Walking the dormitory halls that night, Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers. He mentioned the need to some ministerial students who were there, but was met with only silence or pious excuses. Moody returned to the dorm, gathered up the shoes, and alone in his room, the world's only famous evangelist began to clean and polish the shoes. Only the unexpected arrival of a friend in the midst of the work revealed the secret.

"When the foreign visitors opened their doors the next morning, their shoes were shined. They never knew by whom. Moody told no one, but his friend told a few people, and during the rest of the conference, different men volunteered to shine the shoes in secret. Perhaps the episode is a vital insight into why God used D. L. Moody as He did. He was a man with a servant's heart and that was the basis of his true greatness" (Gary Inrig, *A Call to Excellence*, (Victor Books, a division of SP Publishing, Wheaton, Ill; 1985), p. 98).

Today, we see Jesus both demonstrating, teaching, and even commanding this idea of "**true greatness through service**" to His disciples -- who were obviously still struggling with the concept. Here is how the New Living Translation phrases these opening verses from John, chapter 13.

*Before the Passover celebration, **Jesus knew** that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He now showed the disciples the full extent of his love. It was time for supper **Jesus knowing** that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God... got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he had around him. (vs. 1-5)*

This is a story we are all perhaps too familiar with. Jesus washes the disciples' feet both setting an example and now commanding them, "*as their Lord, Teacher, and Master,*" to humbly serve each other. Variations of this lesson on servant leadership appear in all the gospel accounts...

*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but **whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant**, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; **just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life** a ransom for many.' (Mt.20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, c.f. Luke 22:25-27.)*

Yes, we know this truth, by His personal demonstration, by His often repeated lessons, and now by His command, that **the only way to “greatness” in the kingdom of God is through our willingness to serve others with a servant’s heart** ... but how many of us actually try live this way ... to live as a servant?

Like His own disciples, there seems to be a stubborn disconnect between this servant attitude that Jesus commands of us and how we really live. **So perhaps John’s gospel account can better help us to do so by sharing what Jesus was actually thinking during these last hours in the upper room as He washed His disciples feet.**

What kind of thinking can empower you and me to serve with joy and not lose our passion for ministry? John tells us, Jesus **KNEW**

- That His final hours had come.
- That God had given Him authority over everything.
- That He had come from God,
- And that He was returning to God.

Thus, like Jesus, the first thing we need to KNOW is: who we are in God.

If we don’t know who we are in God we will spend most of our energy doing things to define our identity. And tragically nothing we can do—no attainment, no honor, no accomplishment, no amount of human recognition can adequately define our identity.

Why? Because our identity is not found in what we do but in who, by the grace of God, we have become. That’s why Paul spends so much time in his letter to the Ephesian Christians explaining **who they are in Christ**.

"[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, (vs. 1:4-5)

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. **For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.** (Eph 2:8-10)*

We don’t do “good works” in order to find out who we are. We do “good works” because of who we have become. The first thing you and I need as our foundation for servant ministry is a clear understanding of who we are in God.

- I am what I am by the grace of God.
- Out of who I am in God I serve you.
- And in the same way you serve me.

In the upper room, Jesus gladly performed the most humbling task of that culture; bowing before the disciples and washing their feet. Why hadn't one of the disciples done this lowly but necessary task? I suspect, that in their running debate over who was the greatest, none of them, by so doing, wanted to visually place themselves at the bottom of the pecking order. None of the disciples were secure enough in who they were in God's family to embrace the job of a servant.

But Jesus knowing who He was and that ***He had come from God***, was not insecure about his identity; therefore, neither taking on this lowly task, nor next day, facing down the horror of the cross was a threat to His identity.

When we only define ourselves by what we do, we will be so busy trying to do something to put us in a good light, that we won't do much service. But when we are firmly confident in who we are in Christ, we can take any lowly position without worrying about being considered insignificant.

The story is told that one day, as Booker T. Washington was walking to his offices, a white woman called for him to come move a chifferobe around in her house. Washington politely helped move the chifferobe, then bid her a "good day" and walked on to work. When the woman later found out that she had treated the founder and President of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama like a common worker, she was deeply embarrassed and apologetic. Washington simply replied "*that he was always glad to help his friends,*" and thus won an avid supporter of the Institute thereafter.

Like Jesus, Booker T. Washington, could serve so honorably and graciously in such difficult circumstances, because he knew who he was in the family of God. **Jesus knew who He was, He also knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything...**

To outside observers, that Last Supper perhaps looked like thirteen helpless men hiding from the wrath of the religious hierarchy. But in reality, reclining in that tiny upper room was the power center of the universe. In reality all power in heaven and earth now belonged to Jesus. He was not the helpless victim of some sinister plot to kill Him. He was the willing, voluntary Lamb slain before the foundation of the world; **He knew who He was, He knew His authority, He even knew his mission in life.**

For all of His 33 years, Jesus had not been acting alone according to His own initiative. He knew He had been sent by the Father for a specific purpose and with a specific mission to accomplish: to give His life in ransom for God's lost children. Now John records, He also knew *that His hour had come*; that He was approaching the climax of His ministry.

Do you know why you are here? Do you have some sense of mission in your soul?

God has a mission for every believer. Continuing on in his Ephesian letter, Paul records that God has given each of us, with specific abilities, as gifts to help the body of Christ grow in faith (Ephesians 4:11-14). What is your gift, what mission has God given you? You will find no greater satisfaction in life than to discover that mission and pursue it with all your heart.

Jesus knew He had come from God for a specific purpose; with a specific mission. One of the great themes in the gospel of John is this sense of mission in Jesus' life. But here is some marvelous news; Jesus has now sent you and me out with the same commission. After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples "***As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.***" (John 20:21)

When you and I embrace a cause that is worthy of our very best, worth our personal sacrifice, worth the investment of our personal time and energy — that's when we become a true servant. Without that sense of purpose and mission anybody will regress to a selfish lifestyle.

Sometimes as a pastor I have to go back and remind myself why I am doing what I do. In a similar way, why in the world would you give your hard earned money to a church? Why would you volunteer to teach Sunday School, or lead worship, or sit at a prayer table? You would only do it if you had a vision of what it means to your Lord. "*And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*" Matt 25:40

Jesus not only knew Who He was, He knew the authority God had given Him and that His mission in life was coming to a conclusion; He also knew where next He was going. Look again at verse 3 of our text, "*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and **was going to God**, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around His waist and began to wash the disciples' feet.*"

I don't think we talk enough about heaven anymore. The cares of life tend to occupy our minds. We can so easily get caught up in the daily activities that we forget not only who we are, but also where we are going. "*Soon and very Soon We are Going to See the King.*" Does that truth grip your heart and strengthen your resolve? Does the fact that all our worst struggles in life are but a *momentary affliction* compared to eternity, keep our problems in perspective? 2 Cor. 4:17

I dream of one day being among that countless number of saints standing upon the glassy sea of heaven and casting their crowns at the feet of Jesus and I'm motivated to do something that makes an eternal difference.

We have many servants of the Lord in this room. But how many have also discovered that it is a lot easier to start out being a servant than to continue as a servant? I have found that being a servant gets to be real work, real fast. If I serve just when I'm

excited, I won't serve very long. **So, if I don't learn how to nurture a servant's heart, I will get tired of doing things for other people while expecting nothing in return.**

But when I think about that great day when I stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of my life — something swells up in my heart and says, "*I want that to be a good day, not a bad day. I don't want to be ashamed when I stand before the Lord who loved me and gave Himself for me. I want to put some joy in His heart and hear Him say, 'Well done good and faithful servant!'*"

So, Know who you are in God, Know where you have come from and where by the grace of God you are now going; know also if you can, the mission for which God has gifted you to the church. Know one more thing: what it is to live in the love of Jesus and to pass it on to others.

In the first verse of our text, John makes it very clear that Jesus knew the time for him to lay down His life was very near. But in that verse John also makes a comment about Jesus related to this issue of servant-hood,

Love is one of the most amazing dynamics there is. In a way it defies explanation. I can talk about self-preservation, the survival of the fittest, and I can develop theories of evolution, but when I'm confronted with the reality of sacrificial love, I am looking at something that biology alone cannot explain. The Bible says, "*God is love.*" Outside of God there is no reasonable explanation of real love.

Love will cause a person to sacrifice personal comfort and gain for the well-being of another. Love caused the famous evangelist D.L. Moody to secretly polish others' shoes late at night. As He Himself told the disciples, it was love that motivated Jesus to lay down His life for us; *for his friends*. What the world needs now is love — not a Hollywood distortion of love, not lust and selfish desire — but of sacrificial servant love. Such is the only love that will win the lost sinner.

But how can I love selfish, rebellious people enough to serve them? (by the way, that pretty well describes every one of us if we walk in the flesh). Our Bible declares, "***God so loved the world that He gave...***" This should also be my motive for service. But how do I get motivated this way? First, I need the influence of the Holy Spirit pouring God's love into my heart. Romans 5:5 Without the love of God inside me, I cannot truly love other people.

How do I nurture that love for people? I must go back to God's Word and remember how God looks at people. "*God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"

God sees something in people that is so precious to Him that He would send His Son to suffer and die for their salvation. I'm convinced that His love is so personal that even if you were the only person on earth, Jesus would still have paid that same price for you.

Jesus looked at His disciples and said in His heart, "*You are why I will pay this price.*" He looked down the ages and saw you and me and said in His heart, "You are why I will pay this price."

He looks down on Bedford and sees sitting in a bar, a man who has left his wife and forsaken his children, or sitting on the curb, a young gay couple with rainbow hair and tattoos. You and I look at them and if we're not careful, we won't see what Jesus sees. He looks at those people and says in His heart once again, "*You are why I paid the price.*"

If I can look at that person I'm about to serve and realize how precious that soul is to Jesus, I can be encouraged to continue serving. This is why the Bible urges me to, ***Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, [out of love for us] though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.*** Philippians 2:5-11

Are you weary? Are you losing heart in your service to others? Consider Jesus. Consider the joy that allowed Him to look beyond even the cross for your sake. Consider what that person means to Him. **As we follow our Lord and Teacher, our Master Servant, His love nurtured in our hearts will cause us -- in the same way -- to serve others.** May we all have the mind of Christ in these matters?

Coming to the communion table this morning, I invite you to pray a bold prayer: asking God to let you see yourself as He sees you and see others as He sees them. Ask Him to give you a servant's heart like Jesus and then point you to someone who needs to have their feet washed.