

The Servant Lord

by Mariano Di Gangi

The sermon emphasizes Jesus' example of humble service through foot washing, calling believers to serve one another in love and humility.

Duration: 32:23

Scripture: John 13:1

Topics: "Jesus", "Humility", "Servanthood"

Description

Mariano Di Gangi emphasizes the self-portrait of Jesus as the Servant Lord, illustrating how Jesus, aware of his impending sacrifice, humbly washed the feet of his disciples, teaching them the importance of service and humility. He contrasts the world's pursuit of power with the call to serve one another, highlighting that true greatness in God's kingdom is found in selfless service. Di Gangi urges the congregation to understand the significance of Jesus' actions and to embody that servant attitude in their relationships, emphasizing that knowledge of Christ's teachings must translate into action. The sermon concludes with a call to reflect Christ's likeness through loving service, fostering unity and credibility in the Christian community.

Transcript

On these Sunday evenings, we have been considering some of the self-portraits of Jesus, which are found in the gallery of art that is the Gospel according to John. And this evening, we come to consider Jesus, the Servant Lord. Reading from the Gospel according to John, the 13th chapter, beginning at verse 1. Hear the reading of this portion of God's written and inspired word.

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.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. 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, wrapped the towel around his waist.

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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my

feet? Jesus replied, You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand. No, said Peter, you shall never wash my feet.

Jesus answered, Unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Then Lord Simon Peter replied, Not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well. 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. For he knew who was going to betray him, and that is why he said, Not everyone was clean. 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. You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

All through the Middle Ages, artists painted figures with flatness. As you move into the Renaissance period, the figures begin to take shape through the use of light and dark, almost ready to stand out of the canvas. And they began to notice the world of nature, so that in some of the most outstanding portraits that come to us from the Renaissance era, you not only have someone in the foreground, but you have an exquisite little landscape or village scene in the distance.

That's the way it is with Leonardo da Vinci's famed Mona Lisa. She's in the foreground, but behind her you can see a road that twists and turns and wends its way onto the horizon to green hills. That's the way it is with the work of the Flemish artist Jan van Eyck.

He has a trick way of showing you something through an open window beyond the person who is the chief character in the painting. And the same thing was done by Johannes Vermeer, the great Dutch painter. Sometimes they would make use of a mirror in which other things would be reflected.

Sometimes by opening a door, a window, or a gate, they would show you an exquisite landscape beyond the person who is being portrayed. And that's exactly the way it is with the self-portrait of Jesus tonight. In the background, you've got some very significant details, and we should notice them carefully before proceeding to look at the masterful figure of Jesus that dominates the foreground.

In the background, you've got statements that give you the idea that Jesus is no victim of circumstance. He knows what is about to happen, and rather than show passive resignation or vigorous resistance, he willingly chooses to go the way of suffering and the cross. The account tells us in the background there is an awareness that Jesus has come from the Father into the world.

Remember what he said in the sixth chapter, I am the bread of God. I am the bread come down from heaven. In the eighth chapter of John, Jesus challenged his contemporaries, and he said, you are from this world, and some of you come from beneath.

I am from above. He never lost sight of the fact that he came into this world out of an intimate and everlasting relationship to the heavenly Father. He came down from heaven into the world from the side of

God the Father.

In the background, you have this other awareness. He is aware that the time for him to depart from the world is fast approaching. Jesus could very well sing the hymn that was Charles Spurgeon's favorite, The Sands of Time Are Sinking, and he knew that the time was coming when he would have to experience suffering, when he would have to bear the agony and the sin of the world.

He was aware of having come from God into the world. He was aware of the time fast approaching when he would depart from the world and return to the Father. And he knew that Satan, the devil, the adversary, had put it into the heart of Judas to betray him.

Temptation comes from the devil. Transgression was committed by Judas. And therefore, we cannot pass things off and exonerate ourselves by pleading, the devil made me do it.

It was I who did it. The temptation came from Satan, but the transgression, the culpability, belongs only to Judas, the traitor. And Jesus knew that having come into this world, he would depart from this world through an act of treachery that would put him into the hands of his enemies and ultimately nail him to the accursed tree.

In the background, you have yet another awareness of Jesus. He is aware of returning to the Father and of receiving from the Father absolute and universal sovereignty. He looked beyond the cross and he saw the crown.

He looked beyond the deep valley of shame and humiliation upward to the mountain peak of his coming glory and majesty. And he knew that on the third day, following the crucifixion, he would rise from the dead and before returning to the right hand of the majesty on high, he could say, all power in heaven and earth has been given to me. All of this, stated in almost incidental fashion, is part of the intriguing background for the portrait of Jesus given in our text for tonight.

There were two things that we must do as we contemplate this passage. And the first is to look at what Jesus does. And the second is to learn from what Jesus says.

Look at what Jesus does. Jesus and his followers have made the long walk from Bethany to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival. They've been wearing open sandals.

The roads are not paved and the terrain is dusty. They come in from their walk in the dust of those roads and scatter themselves around the table as supper is being prepared. Something that is usually done hasn't yet happened.

It's customary for the host to ask one of his servants to wash the feet of those who have trodden dusty roads as they come to the table. But no one makes a move. There is no servant.

And we can imagine Matthew looking at John and John looking at Thomas and Thomas looking at Bartholomew and Bartholomew looking at Nathanael and not a single one of them makes a move. Why should they? Haven't they recently had an argument that has not yet died down? Haven't they been at each other's throats arguing as to who was the greatest in the kingdom? Haven't they been elbowing their way to the front? Haven't they shown that instead of being hungry and thirsty for righteousness, they are lusting for primacy and power? Jesus on the road has rebuked them for acting like a bunch of unregenerate pagans. That's the way the world acts.

The world pushes and shoves and clamors for power and tramples on others. It should not be that way among you, said Jesus. And you wonder if they'd really let the lesson sink in.

So here were all these men, each of them sitting on his prerogative, nobody daring to move, lest it be interpreted as a sign of weakness that they had given in to help and to serve others. The pitcher of water was on the table. So was the basin.

So was the towel. But not a single one of them moved. Jesus gets up from the table.

And in this portrait we see him rising from supper, divesting himself of his outer garment, girding himself with a towel that serves as an apron and a means of drying wet feet. He takes the pitcher, fills the basin, and begins to wash their feet. There's an interruption.

Very sudden interruption by the impulsive man that you expect would break the silence. It was Simon Peter, of course. Out of a sense of shame, aware of the incongruity of what is happening, he just won't let it happen to him.

You wash my feet? You are my teacher. You are my Lord. How can I let you do this to me? There was another incongruity involved.

If he is indeed Lord, then what business, dear disciple, have you got dictating to him what he can or cannot do? And this is consistently Peter right on through to the tenth chapter of the book of Acts, where the Lord commands him to go and to do something, and he says, not so, Lord. Are you and I guilty of the same thing? Calling him Lord and telling him what he can or cannot do in our life? Calling him Lord, but resisting the direction that he gives with all his sovereignty? Calling him teacher, but failing to put into practice what he teaches? There is an incongruity in the creator of the universe bowing down to wash the feet of frail men of dust. But there's an even greater incongruity of a mere worm telling its creator what he may or may not do.

And Jesus makes it very plain to Peter that he simply lacks understanding, and so do they all. And so we look at what Jesus does. But now we learn from what Jesus says.

Having washed their feet, having dried them with the towel, he comes back to his place at the table, and he asks them a question. Do you understand what I have done for you? That's a question that you and I should ask ourselves at every turn of the ministry of Jesus. We look at him in his cradle, and the voiceless, speechless child asks us, do you know what I have done for you? Unless we do know what he did for us in leaving heaven and coming to earth, we haven't yet understood the meaning of Christmas and the incarnation.

Do you know what I have done for you in pouring out my life in ministry to the sick, to the poor, to the outcast, to the unloved? Do you know what I have done for you in taking the weight of the cross and the judgment of God against your sin on my sinless back? Do you know and do you understand what I am doing for you in grappling with death and defeating your enemy and mine on the third day? Do you understand what I am doing for you at God's right hand, pleading your cause against the enemy of your soul? Do you understand what I am about to do for you at the end of the world when I come and bring resurrection and the fullness of my glorious kingdom? Do you understand what it is that I have done, I am doing, and I will do for you? He asked them a question. They gave him no answer. They were still lacking in understanding.

Particularly, do you understand what I have done to you and for you in washing and wiping your feet? There's a double-barreled significance here to what Jesus did. And one is that the foot washing was symbolic of the cleansing of the purification from the stain of sin that only he is able to give. The Apostle John was later to write in his first epistle, The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us, purges us from all sin.

And he assures us later on that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us, to wash us from every stain of sin. The washing was a sign. It was symbolic of the cleansing that he alone could give.

But the washing was also something else. It was a dramatizing of the truth that greatness in the kingdom of God consists not in how many people we can dominate to do our will, but how willing we are to do God's will, even if it means service to the point of sacrifice. Jesus here dramatizes the tremendous truth that we were not created to seek status, but to render service.

He puts it to them very plainly in verse 13. You call me teacher and Lord, rightly so, for that is what I am. Jesus accepted the designation that they gave him when they called him rabbi, teacher, master.

And when they called him Lord, which was more than a mere title of polite respect, it is the Jehovah of the Old Testament manifested in the flesh. They call him teacher and that is what he is. All you've got to do is read through the priceless parables that fell like pearls from his lips.

All you've got to do is read the wisdom of his sayings and his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and you will see that he is the master teacher. He is also the Lord, the sovereign one, God manifested in the flesh with all of the authority that belongs to deity. You call me teacher, you call me Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am.

But, says Jesus, if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. If I, who am your teacher, can stoop to do this for you, surely you, who are all students on the same level, can do this for each other. If I, who am Lord, can stoop to wash the feet of my servants, surely my servants can wash one another's feet.

He argues from the greater to the lesser. If I have done this, you certainly ought to do the same for one another. Moreover, says Jesus in verse 15, I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

The Pope of Rome, during Holy Week, seeks out someone whose feet he can wash, following a ritual that supposedly arises from this incident in the gospel. Be that as it may, this is no ritual that you and I ought to seek to follow slavishly and externally once a year. This is an attitude, not an action.

This is an attitude that must characterize our relationships with each other at every single level, whether it's in the church, in the home, where we work, where we study. To be in the likeness of the Lord Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve, and is the climax of that service, to give his very life a ransom for many. Remember his words in Matthew chapter 11, after he has said, come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

He said, take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart. Let this mind, this disposition, this attitude be in you and in me, which was also in Christ Jesus, who existing in the very form of God, who being equal with God, yet was willing to make himself of no reputation, and stooped to wash

the feet of his followers, and rose to ascend the wood of the cross, there to serve, and to suffer, and to sacrifice. Later on, the apostle Peter, with Isaiah chapter 53 as the background, and the dramatized example of Jesus in the foreground, was to write to early Christians who were ill-treated slaves, and in 1 Peter chapter 2, starting at verse 18 and running right through verse 25, he's going to tell them, Jesus left us an example that we should follow in his steps.

Reviled he reviled not again. Beaten he blessed. Cursed he prayed for those who ill-treated him.

I have left you an example, says Jesus, that you should follow in my steps. The servant is not greater than his master. The messenger who was sent is not greater than the sender.

If the master has done this for us, if the sender has stooped to serve, surely it is not beneath our dignity to do the same for one another. Notice the way that Jesus punctuates the entire account in verse 17. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Notice the contrast between merely knowing these things and doing them. Our Lord put a tremendous emphasis on knowing, knowing the truth that makes you free, knowing God revealed in Jesus Christ. But our Lord Jesus is not satisfied with the mere intellectual knowledge of the truth.

He insists that we do the truth in our personal and interpersonal relationships with others. Remember the contrast at the wind-up of the sermon on the mount in Matthew 7. Jesus says, whoever hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like the man who built his house on rock and was able to withstand the shocks and tests of time. And whoever merely hears my words and has a knowledge of them but does not put them into practice, that man may build something that externally looks very impressive, but when the testing time comes the hypocrisy of his profession will be seen and he will be swept away with the rolling tide.

Or remember what the brother of Jesus says, James, be ye doers of the word and not only hearers, deceiving yourselves. And later on he goes on to expand and expound on that saying it is not merely a matter of believing with your mind. The devils also believe and they tremble but it doesn't change their way of life.

Faith without works, knowledge without doing is vain, empty, and deserving of judgment. The proof of the sincerity of our Christian commitment is seen not only in what we know but particularly in what we do by way of service in love to one another. Now that you know these things, if you do them, you will be blessed.

Misery results from pushing and shoving and bidding for primacy. Blessedness is the effect of knowing and serving. Why? Because if we know and we do, if we see his example and we follow it in lowly service to each other, we will grow in our likeness to Jesus Christ and there's no greater blessing that any man or woman can experience than a growing Christ likeness in our character.

Second, we will safeguard the peace and unity of the Christian community. For a church in which people each want their own way and do things out of spite to others is a church that will fall. But a church where people know and people do what they know and they are willing to serve one another in love is a church that not only shows a Christ-like character but maintains unity and becomes a real community in the midst of a world broken and divided by a thousand prejudices.

And one thing more, it's not only a matter of conformity to the likeness of the servant Lord, it's not only safeguarding the peace and unity of the church, it is a matter of having a testimony that has credibility

before the world. If we are sheer unmitigated aggression and we want our own way or will destroy it all like Samson at his end, our testimony lacks credibility. But if like the Lord and Master and Teacher, we are willing to take that pitcher, fill that basin, gird ourselves with a towel, and to wash the feet of others through loving lowly service, then the testimony that we would render in the eyes of the world will have credibility.

That is what the servant Lord meant when he said, As the Father has sent me in the likeness of a servant, so send I you. Let us pray. Lord, we know the score but our ego stands in the way.

Enable us to be so captivated by the example that you have set that moved by your Holy Spirit, we will serve one another increasingly in love. This we ask in our dear Savior's name. Amen.

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