

Love Serving

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of embodying Christ's love through humble and selfless service to others.

Scripture: John 13:1, Ephesians 2:4

Topics: "Servanthood", "Christ's Love"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound lesson of love demonstrated by Jesus through the act of washing His disciples' feet, highlighting the contrast between the disciples' self-centered ambitions and Christ's selfless servanthood. In a moment charged with expectation and personal interests, Jesus exemplifies true love by humbling Himself to perform a task that none of the disciples were willing to do. This act serves as a powerful reminder that love is not about seeking position or recognition, but about serving others with humility and grace. Sparks calls for believers to embrace the spirit of servanthood, reflecting Christ's love in their actions towards others, especially in a world that often despises the role of a servant.

Transcript

Reading: Eph. 2:4; John 13:1-17.

"Jesus... having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end... he... riseth from supper, and layeth aside his garments; and he took a towel, and girded himself. Then he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded."

THE DISCIPLES - PERSONAL INTERESTS DOMINATING

Here is the great object lesson of Divine love. We must get the setting of this scene in order to obtain something of its real effect. The atmosphere at this time was a high-tension atmosphere. It was charged with a sense of pending crisis. It was full of expectation mingled with wonder - wonder as to exactly what was going to happen. The kingdom was in everybody's thoughts; Jesus was being hailed by the multitudes as the Messiah, palm branches were being waved, people were shouting "Hosanna: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (John 12:13). All the Messianic thoughts and expectations now for many centred in Him, and especially so in the case of His disciples. Some great event in relation to the kingdom was on the point of taking place, and this had given a great impetus to their personal expectations. They were, of course, very much in the grip of the Jewish expectations of the kingdom on

this earth, the ousting of the Roman power, and the setting up of the Kingdom of the Messiah. All that was in the air and in their minds, and they were beginning to see their respective places in this kingdom. The mother of Zebedee's children had come to Jesus and, worshipping Him, had said, in reply to His interrogation of her, "Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom" (Matt. 20:20). You see the expectation: and the two sons were not ignorant of the ambition and request of their mother: they were parties to it. The other disciples were terribly provoked that this thing should have taken place, and as they went on in the way, they talked about this and discussed who should be greatest in the kingdom.

Now that is a statement, but we cannot leave it with just the thought that they were saying to one another "I will be greater than you." They were clearly going into more detail than that, and saying, "In the kingdom, I am going to be so-and-so;" all thinking in terms of place and position, and vying with one another, each trying to go one better than the others. This is indicated in what is recorded as having taken place. It is also recorded that Jesus knew their thoughts, and understood what was going on. So in this wrangle about place, position, personal importance and advantage in this kingdom that was about to come, they were all jangled and on edge with one another, and out of temper. Such was the atmosphere.

So they come to the upper room which Jesus had taken. In every nicely-appointed guest house or guest chamber in Jerusalem, just inside the door was a little table, and upon it a basin, with a jug of scented water and an apron and a towel. If it were the house of a wealthy or well-to-do person, there would be a servant in attendance. But when Jesus took the room He did not employ a servant, and only the things were there. And the disciples arrive in this spirit, with this mentality, in the upper room - annoyed, irritated, eyeing one another; and they pass in through the door. They look up at the ceiling, or somewhere else, but none of them sees the basin! They are not in a mood for that sort of thing at all. The supper is ready, and they sit down to supper with unwashed feet. Now when I was a young man, there were two cities which were said to be at that time the two dirtiest cities in the world, and one of them was Jerusalem; but even that had a semblance of sanitation. But there was no such thing in the days when the Lord was there. All the garbage and refuse was pitched out into the street. Think of a hot day in the east, the dust and the mess and the smell! They had come through that and gone in. That basin was not a thing that you could just pass by as though it did not mean anything - some quite unnecessary thing. There was a real need for it and for that scented water. But no, they had carefully not seen it!

That is the very strong setting of the whole scene. It is not exaggerated, it is only bringing out the details that are here, a matter of reading between the lines. They had all passed by and sat down to supper.

THE SERVANT SPIRIT LACKING

Now, let us look at these men themselves. Their feelings had been irritated and accentuated; and you know, when we get like that, what excuses we make and how we argue and bring up all we can to support our position. Is that not human nature?

There was Matthew. Now Matthew had taken on service with the alien government in occupation and had made a lot of money out of it, so much so that when Jesus called him to discipleship, he made a great feast for all his friends. He could not have made a great feast without having money, and he could not have had an expensive feast without having servants. So Matthew was doubtless a man who had always someone to wash his feet, and who thought of himself as the big man. No servant, he!

There were James and John. They were friends of the High Priest and had access to the High Priest's court; so they were somebody in the social world, in the world of public influence and importance.

And there was Peter; and Peter could, under these conditions, argue like this - "I am one of the inner three; I have always been privileged above the rest; I have been recognized as something more than the others. Whenever the Lord has wanted something special, I have been one of the three with Him; so it is not my place to wait on the others."

THE LORD - PROMPTED BY LOVE TO LOWLY SERVICE

I am not saying all this merely to draw an entertaining or vivid picture. It is by way of getting the right setting for our Lord. In that atmosphere, in the presence of that mentality, that attitude: false, artificial, unworthy, and oh, so petty, so mean, so contemptible: "He... riseth from supper" - to perform Himself the task they all avoided. What a significance there is in John's statement in that connection! - "knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he came forth from God, and goeth unto God." This One it is who rises from supper, and (following, no doubt, what was the usual custom) goes quietly over to the door and takes off His outer robe and lays it down, takes the apron (the servant's apron) and puts it on, ties the towel round His waist, pours water into the basin, and comes to wash His disciples' feet. "Having loved his own that were in the world (and just now, at any rate, so very much of the world), he loved them unto the end (unto the uttermost)."

The question immediately arises, and is answered here, What is love to the uttermost? What is the love of Christ? What is the love of God? It is not in sentimental words. No, this is it. It is not love for the lovely and the lovable only, for those whom you cannot help loving. This is the love to the uttermost.

OUR CLEANSING THE OUTCOME OF SELFLESS LOVE

The rest of His explanation, His comment, His message founded upon what He had done, does bring us all up short for He said, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt understand afterward" And what did they know afterward? They came to know that the world itself was a filthy place, deep-dyed in sin's degradation, with all the muck and refuse of hell spread over it - worse than the streets of Jerusalem - and men had to be saved from that degradation, cleansed from all that filthiness; and it was going to be done, not by a haughty Matthew nor a self-important Peter, but by the Lamb of God becoming "obedient unto death, yea, the death of the Cross" (Phil. 2:8). It was going to be done by stripping, by humbling, by emptying, by the spirit of uttermost service - service of this kind, Christ's service to us. Oh, what humiliation, what emptying, lies behind our cleansing! What it has cost! That is what He calls love - not the finding of a place for ourselves in the Kingdom, being something important, giving ourselves airs. Moffat translates that fragment in 1 Cor. 13 - "Love... doth not behave itself unseemly," - as "Love giveth itself no airs." We look at the Lord Jesus, and there we see love. To think for a moment of what any given thing is going to mean to our pride, to our influence, to our position, to our prestige, never comes in with love. Love, this love, never leaves room for such a thing as standing up for our rights, for saying they are not being recognized, that we are not being given our place. Oh no, there is none of that here. If the Lord Jesus had taken that position, He certainly would never have enacted this object lesson of love, and would never have gone to the Cross at all; and we should never have been cleansed and saved from this world. It is a sad picture, from one standpoint.

THE CALL TO FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM IN SERVANTHOOD

I do not know how you feel about it. I confess to you that, as I have been thinking about this, I have wondered whether I ought to pass it on to anyone else. I know by long experience that it is possible to turn the edge of something the Lord says to one's own heart by giving it out as a message. Have you found that, those of you that minister? The Lord brings some thing strongly to you and you give it as a message, and it has gone from you. I take this to my heart. And as I see that my salvation and yours, in the infinite love of God, was through the spirit of lowliest service, servanthood, I have to say, Is there any other kind of service? Can we hope to see anything done by any other kind of movement of the Spirit? Oh, this is more an appeal than a profound message! It all centres in this - "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the uttermost" - such men as they were, and as we are. I do not see them objectively, I see them subjectively. I can see a Peter, a Matthew, a Judas, in my own heart. Thank God, He loves unto the uttermost, and His love unto the uttermost is of this kind, that He does not stand on His rights and dignity and position and demand that I come down in an abject slavery to acknowledge His lordship. He comes to serve you and me. He is Lord, but for the time being a serving Lord. As He is seen in the glory, mark you, He is still girded. He is Lord, but still the great heavenly Servant, serving us, washing away our sin, delivering us from this present evil world. All He does is in the spirit of the servant. Oh, how the spirit of service and servanthood is despised today! Everywhere you hear it. No one wants to be a servant today. That word "servant" is hated. The spirit of service has almost gone from the earth. The spirit of Christ is a rare thing, but, when it is found, it is a heaven-blessed thing, a mighty power. Oh, do not despise the servant position! Be not ambitious for place, for recognition, for name, for reputation. Be not ambitious to have your rights recognized. God fill us with this spirit, that we are not all the time waiting for others to do something for us, but looking to see what we can do for them in Christ's name - being busy in the right sense to find out how much we can do for the Lord's people because they are the Lord's people, and for the unsaved because He died to save them, and for the unclean because He died to cleanse them. The Lord fill us with this spirit!

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