

LOVING BY SERVING


 9

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

John 13:1-35

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

"For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (John 13:15)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Oct. 26	Laban Arranges to Wash Servant's Feet	Genesis 24:24-33
T	Oct. 27	Brothers Provided Water to Wash Feet	Genesis 43:20-25
W	Oct. 28	Servants and Masters, but Same Lord	Ephesians 4:6-9
Th	Oct. 29	Peter Denies Jesus Three Times	John 13:36-38; 18:15-18, 25-27
F	Oct. 30	Jesus Betrayed by a Trusted Disciple	Psalms 41:8-10; John 13:21-30
Sa	Oct. 31	Mary Anoints Jesus' Feet with Perfume	John 12:1-7

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

At summer camp, the jobs assigned campers vary a great deal. Peeling vegetables is not highly sought after, but it is considerably better than cleaning the toilets. Showing visitors around the camp or working in the office are assignments hoped for and bragged about by those who land them. Even the youngest campers want to lead the line or be first in the pool. The desire for status is rather contagious.

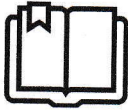
Many people measure their worth by their occupation and how it compares to neighbors' jobs. Depending on one's social setting, the comparison may be a matter of whether one is a foreman or just one of the crew. Sometimes moving into a white-collar job is considered a success, depending on how others in the neighborhood are faring. Other people determine their personal value by the level of education attained. Salary is always a point of comparison, but equally important is how a particular job is viewed by others. Would you rather make boots or shine them?

Most of the time, status doesn't mean that much, but occasionally it does. Significant financial supporters of an institution receive more attention when requesting tickets, whether

for a basketball game or the symphony orchestra. And most of us would rather be served a nice meal than have to clear the table and wash the dishes.

How do you consider your value as related to your status?

In Jesus we are shown a model of true service. Help us, God, to learn from him and follow his example. Help us to serve others rather than seek to be served. Hear us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

John 13: 1–15, 34–35

13:1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. . . .

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

In contrast with the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), John's gospel has a number of differences. Unlike Matthew and Luke, for instance, John has no narrative concerning the birth of Jesus. While the synoptics report Jesus' cleansing of the temple late in Jesus' ministry, John places it at the very beginning (John 2:13–22). The first miracle John recounts is the changing of water to wine at a wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11). Exactly what to make of these differences is debated, but at the least they make John's interpretation of Jesus' ministry surprising and interesting.

John's narrative is presented in roughly two parts. Part One (chaps. 1–12) reflects on Jesus' public ministry, his various healings and teachings. Part Two (chaps. 13–21) is devoted mostly to Jesus' dealings with his special circle of disciples just prior to his arrest (13–17); Jesus' trial, execution, and burial (18–19); and Jesus' encounters with his followers after his resurrection (20–21).

As the book's second half begins, Jesus is gathered with his disciples for a meal. The synoptics all report a shared meal immediately before Jesus' arrest and subsequent crucifixion, but John differs. The Synoptic Gospels associate the meal with the celebration of the Passover. In John, Jesus' meal with his disciples is a farewell dinner, but without the marks of the Passover meal.

The meal was made special by Jesus' actions. Across the ancient world it was customary for guests to be offered hospitality when they came to someone's house. Thus Abraham, for instance, eagerly welcomed the travelers who came his way and urged them to stop and visit, wash their feet, and rest (Gen.18:4). In Luke, Jesus visited the home of Simon but rebuked his host for not providing for washing his feet, nor a kiss of greeting, nor oil to anoint his head—the three traditional marks of hospitality (Luke 7:44–47).

Jesus had at least two major concerns he wanted to address at the meal. To make certain he had their attention, he waited for the disciples to arrive, and then he changed his attire to appear as a slave. Jesus wanted his disciples to learn that just as Jesus, their Teacher and Lord, had become their servant, so too they, like him, were called to be servants, not to be served (John 13:12–17).

Jesus' second emphasis was on a "new commandment": Jesus charged his disciples to love one another. Whomever else they

might love, they were to love other disciples. In so doing they would become beacons of God's love (vv. 34–35).

? In light of the numerous passages about love we have already explored in this series of lessons, in what sense can this be called a “new commandment”?

SERVICE AS LOVE

In both the Old and New Testaments, we are repeatedly reminded of the love that God displayed to ancient Israel and to the church. We are assured that we can count on God's love, and Jesus is the confirmation and guarantee of God's love.

In previous lessons, we explored the love we are to have for our neighbors, even our enemies, and, of course, for God. In John, a new focus addresses the shape of the love we are to have. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he offered an example of how love should look: love should look like service.

Some Christians understand Jesus' action to have instituted a sacrament (foot washing) that is to be re-enacted regularly. Others understand this action to be representative of appropriate service and use it in special times, particularly during Lent. But most Christians do not believe that followers of Jesus need replicate Jesus' particular act of washing his disciples' feet to participate in his love through service.

The service Jesus demonstrated had several dimensions. Foremost, it was humbling. To wash the feet of another was servants' work. You had to lower yourself (literally and figuratively) to complete this menial task, but it was necessary and certainly not considered a waste of time. Though perhaps not the most important act of service, this is the example Jesus gave.

This act also requires submission on the part of the one whose feet are being washed. Peter objected, saying that he would not permit Jesus to wash his feet. But Jesus recognized that hidden in this protest was pride. In effect Peter was claiming he was more important than the others and thus needed greater attention. Jesus didn't buy it at all.

A third implication is that all people could and should be included. Rich and old, first timers and experienced followers, Peter and Judas Iscariot: No favoritism was to be shown. All were expected at various times to take turns washing and being washed.

What was especially distinctive was to whom it was directed. Certainly, this mandate applied to all of Jesus' followers, but it was first of all Jesus' inner circle who were to serve and be served, to love as Jesus had in a simple but profound demonstration of the meaning of love.

Rather than provide beautiful expressions of the meaning of love, Jesus gave a concrete example. The disciples were to love one another as Jesus had loved them. Before being concerned about those far distant in another land, they needed to begin with those nearest at hand.

 Consider how you love others. How does it look like service?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Understanding service as an expression of love offers any number of options for action. Any of the helping professions like teaching, nursing, or counseling provide ample opportunity, as well as caring for animals, caring for the land, and caring for the environment. Service does not automatically equate to love, but love without service is hot air. In the book of James this is succinctly summed up: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas. 2:17).

Here, however, something else is suggested—something perhaps startling and difficult. In John, Jesus addresses a very particular group, his innermost circle of friends, not the crowds. Jesus directed them to wash one another's feet to demonstrate the love Jesus had shown to them.

This is startling because it is so obvious and difficult because it is so personal. In a small group—like one of the multitudes of tiny congregations—it is difficult to love everyone because each person is so well known. Yet it is imperative that we love one another, *especially* in such a group. There is a Peter but also a Judas, each to have their feet washed. We know who they are because we all live in the same neighborhood and go to the same church. We are not asked simply to tolerate one another. We are instructed to serve one another as an act of love.

The person who is always coming in late to church school class, the person who has all the answers and is quick to announce them, the needy person who regularly shares all the bad news of life: each of them is there. All need to have their feet washed, including me! Yes, Jesus' admonition is especially

difficult in a small group where we personally know one another, but if we cannot love those close to us, who can we ever love?

But there is more. Humans seem always to be seeking status, to be the favorite of parents, teachers, and colleagues. Peter insisted he had to be washed from toe to head because he considered himself special, one who deserved extra attention. Jesus made himself least among them by assuming the role of a servant. If the master serves, so should the disciples. No one is better than another. Deceit, vainglory, and hypocrisy all seek to entrap the unwary. By the character of their love for one another the disciples would declare their allegiance to Jesus, their Lord.

 What is your response to such a strategy?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. In Middle Eastern culture to this day, being at someone's feet, being stepped on, or even being struck by someone's shoe is a tremendous insult. The idea of the humiliating nature of being at a person's feet is often expressed in Scripture (Ps. 8:6; Matt. 10:14; Mark 7:25).
2. Even as Jesus' ministry came to a close, his disciples sought rank that elevated them above the others (20:20–28; Mark 10:35–45; Luke 22:24–27). Jesus declared: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). Jesus' example and instructions sets the standard for servant leadership (John 13:13–17).
3. Christians are called to love each other by serving. Even leadership roles in the church are given titles that describe undesirable and menial roles. A shepherd (pastor) was considered to be among the lowest of society (Gen. 46:34). A deacon/minister was a name for a servant. Even the term "bishop" was a servant term, denoting a servant who oversaw other servants.