**GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS**

**SERVANTS OF THE SERVANT-KING**

**John 13:1-17**

**INTRODUCTION**

We’re continuing our series called “Gospel Foundations” today in what will be our tenth sermon in this series. Our aim in taking you through this series is to give you a picture of the kind of church we want to increasingly become. We want to be a church that’s full of humble people who use their words to build others up, who sing to the glory of Christ, who passionately pursue holiness, who generously share with those in need, and who boldly share the message of salvation as we are filled with the Spirit. And the only way that we can become this kind of church is by building our lives and our community on the truth and power of the gospel.

I am so grateful that to some extent the church we want to be is the church we already are. So many of you excel in sharing evidences of grace, practicing biblical fellowship, and singing joyfully about the person and work of Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father.

But if you’re like me, you know that our sinful hearts have a habit of forgetting what we once knew. We forget the why of what we do, and when we forget the why, it’s only a matter of time before we forget the what.

That’s why we’re going through this series. We want to remind ourselves not only of what we do, but why we do it. We need a fresh dose of biblical truth to show us how our values and practices are rooted in the gospel.

And as new friends join our church, we want to do this so that we can invite them into both the doctrine and the culture of our church. Jesus wants us to be one, to be united in truth and love, in what we believe, and in what we do.

Today we’re going to look at another value that we want to cultivate in our church. It’s the value of servanthood. If you know anything about Christianity, you know that servanthood is a central part of our faith. Jesus himself is called the “suffering servant”. His suffering on the cross was an act of service for those who would trust in him. It was a role that he willingly and self-consciously took upon himself as he emptied himself of his divine glory and took on the form of a servant.

“I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:27)

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

This is an astounding reality. The King of Glory stepped down from his throne to serve sinners like us in the humble form of humanity. And as we respond to his act of service with repentance and faith, Jesus calls us to imitate his example, to serve others in the same way that Jesus served us.

But what does that look like? How does Jesus want us to serve others? We live in a culture where many know what it is to *be* served, but not many know what it is *to* serve.

Think about the times when you might use the word “service”. We use the word when we’re saying our cars need service. We use it when we’re talking about “customer service”. In both cases, we are the ones being served. We like that arrangement, because receiving service makes us feel important.

But Jesus came not to *be* served, but *to* serve. He came not to receive, but to give his life as a ransom for many, and he calls his followers to do the same. And unlike the world of customer service, we don’t serve in order to get a five-star rating or to secure customer loyalty. We serve to please our servant-king, and to show others what he is like.

Today we’re going to examine one of our Lord’s most beautiful and striking acts of service as he literally strips down, dresses as a servant, and washes the feet of his disciples. And as we behold the servanthood of the Lord Jesus, we are called to imitate his example, because Jesus came both to serve and to turn us into servants as well.

As C.S. Lewis so memorably wrote in his classic book *Mere Christianity*,

“The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself are simply a waste of time.” – C.S. Lewis

The title of this sermon is **Servants of the Servant-King.** We’re going to break up this sermon into two parts:

1. The Servant-King
2. The Servants of the Servant-King

(1) **THE SERVANT-KING**

Verse 1 sets the stage for our text today. It says that these events happened “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father”. Jesus is on the way to the cross, and he knows it. He’s always known it, of course, because the cross is the reason why he came into the world in the first place. He was born to die for sinners. But it’s one thing to know that something horrible is going to happen to you. It’s another thing to know that it’s going to happen *soon*.

Jesus had been threatened by the Pharisees and Scribes many times in the past, but he was always able to say, “My hour has not yet come”. He knew they couldn’t hurt him because God his Father wouldn’t allow it. But now that’s changed. Jesus knows that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father through the means of the cross.

How did he respond to this? When Jesus first realized that his hour had come, he said in John 12:27,

“Now is my soul troubled.”

And later in John 13:21, it says,

“After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit”.

The word for “troubled” here means “inward turmoil” or “agitation”. It’s the same thing Jesus felt when he saw everyone weeping in front of the tomb of Lazarus. It’s what led him to weep with them. Jesus isn’t heading to his death with a calm and cool attitude. Under the surface, his emotions are erupting as he realizes just how much he must suffer in the coming hours.

A big part of that suffering would be the pain of betrayal by one of his closest friends. Verse 2 says “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him”. Judas was one of the twelve apostles. He had walked with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry. He had sat under his teaching. He had served alongside Jesus travelling from village to village healing the sick and preaching the gospel. And now, he was going to betray him. Stab him in the back. Sell his Lord and Master to the Jews for a measly sum of thirty silver coins.

Jesus knew this was going to happen. Verse 11 says, “For he knew who was to betray him”. Jesus not only knows that he’s about to be murdered as an innocent man, but that one of his closest, most trusted friends would be a party to the offence.

How did Jesus respond to this terrible knowledge? If it were you or I, we might have responded with fear, or hatred, or cynicism. But not Jesus. Jesus responded with *love*.

Verse 1 says “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Jesus responded to his inner turmoil and agitation by loving his own. He would do that in Chapters 14-16 by giving them one of the most extensive blocks of his teaching in the entire New Testament. He would do that in Chapter 17 by praying for them in what is known as “The High Priestly Prayer”. And he would do that in Chapters 18-19 by going to his death on the cross. Jesus loved his own, and he loved them to the end.

How could he do that? Verse 3 tells us it’s because Jesus knew who he was. As humiliating as the cross would be, it wouldn’t shake his identity, because he knew where he came from. He was from God, sent by the Father and given authority by the Father over all things. And now, through his death, he was returning to the Father. That’s why he wasn’t bitter about what was about to happen to him. That’s why he didn’t shrink back from going to the cross. The cross was the means that God had chosen to save the world, and Jesus was determined to see the plan through.

And so, he is determined to love his own to the end, and he begins this demonstration of love by washing his disciples’ feet. What a remarkable act of service, not only because of what he did, but when he did it. This is Jesus’ hour of greatest need, and yet he doesn’t expect his disciples to serve him. Instead he humbles himself to serve them. In these precious last moments of his life, the master becomes the servant, and not just any servant, but the most menial of servants engaged in the most menial of tasks.

He begins by dressing himself for the task. He lays aside his outer garments, leaving nothing on but a loincloth. Then he takes a towel and ties it around his waist making himself look more like their slave than their Saviour. Then he fills a basin of water and begins to wash the disciples’ feet, wiping them dry with the towel that was wrapped around him.

We need to recognize how humiliating this act of service was in order to appreciate what Jesus was doing. Even for us, touching someone else’s feet is unattractive, and we have relatively clean feet. We have running shoes, and we walk on paved sidewalks. But in those days, people walked in sandals on paths made of mud and dirt, paths that were shared with animals and littered with their feces. You can imagine what that would do to one’s feet. Washing someone else’s feet was so disgusting that some Jews insisted that Jewish slaves should be exempt from the task and that it should be reserved for Gentile slaves only.

Here, we don’t just see a Jew washing the feet of other Jews. We see the Son of God himself rubbing his hands across their filthy feet and using his own waist cloth to wipe them dry. There isn’t a single example in either Jewish or Greco-Roman sources of a superior washing the feet of an inferior. Yet here we have the Creator washing the feet of his creature. This was an unprecedented act of humble service.

His disciples didn’t miss its significance. No doubt they were all uncomfortable, but only Simon Peter was brave (or foolish) enough to say anything. In verse 6, he asks, “Lord, do *you* wash *my* feet?” Jesus tries to tell him that it’s all going to make sense in a few moments, but Peter in his characteristic, cavalier attitude, replies, “You shall never wash my feet.”

In Peter’s eyes, it was simply unfathomable that the master should serve his disciples, especially in such a humiliating way. But Jesus gives him a gentle rebuke: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” He’s saying, “Peter, if you want to be my disciple, you have to let me serve you”.

At that moment, Jesus wasn’t just talking about physical cleansing. He was talking about a spiritual cleansing. That much is clear in the following verses. Peter says in verse 9, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus doesn’t offer to do that, because this isn’t ultimately about having clean body parts. It’s about having a soul made clean by the word of God. That’s what Jesus is getting at in verse 10: “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean”.

Peter was already clean, not by the washing of water, but by the washing of the word. The word that Jesus had spoken about who he is, and what he was sent to do, had already cleansed the souls of those who believed in him. That’s why Jesus says in John 15:3:

“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”

Jesus wasn’t washing away their sins by washing their feet. He wasn’t taking away their guilt. He was symbolizing the true, spiritual cleansing that would ultimately be secured for them on the cross. True cleansing comes not from water but from the Word.

That’s why Jesus says, “And you are clean, but not every one of you.” Not every one of them was clean, even though all of them had clean feet. He’s referring to Judas. Judas had his feet washed, but his soul was still filthy with sin, because in his heart, he had rejected Christ’s word.

Jesus is giving us a picture of the gospel. It wasn’t the gospel itself. It only pointed to the gospel. As Jesus washed their feet, his clean hands covered in their filth in order to make them clean, he was showing us what he would do on the cross for everyone who turns to him. He would take all the filth of our sin and place it upon himself so that our souls could be washed white as snow.

Do you need that cleansing today? Are you weighed down by the burden of your guilt? Are you disgusted by the filth of your own sins? If you are, then Jesus stands ready to cleanse you through the washing of his word. He has taken our filth upon himself so that sinners like you and me could be washed white as snow. On the cross, Jesus died for sinners, and Jesus paid the penalty for sinners. The one who was clean became filthy so that the filthy could be made clean.

Jesus promises that if you turn to him in repentance and faith, he will cleanse you, but you have to receive his cleansing with faith. Don’t be like Peter who said, “You shall never wash my feet”, because if Jesus does not wash you, you will have no share with him. Receive his cleansing, receive his love, and turn to him and sin no more.

(2) **THE SERVANTS OF THE SERVANT-KING**

After washing his disciples’ feet, verse 12 says that he put his outer garments back on and began to teach them about how this was meant to apply to the lives of his followers. This leads to our second point: The Servants of the Servant-King.

In verses 13-17, Jesus explains that the feet washing doesn’t only have spiritual significance. It has moral application as well. He says in verse 14-15, “If I then, you 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.”

Jesus is saying that those who follow him ought to serve like him. They ought to live as “little Christs” by being willing to do absolutely anything for the good of those around them. Jesus is saying that Christians should be known as servants, people who do not shy away from even the most menial of tasks.

How do we do that? And how do we become the kind of church that is characterized by servanthood? Let me give you five principles that will help us cultivate servanthood in our church.

1. **Servanthood is For Every Christian**

First, we need to recognize that servanthood is for every Christian. We all know people who are especially servant-hearted, the kinds of people who are always willing to volunteer and are eager to serve in any way that they can. Romans 12:7 actually calls “service” a spiritual gift. Some people are especially gifted by the Spirit to serve others, and their service is a gift to the church.

For the rest of us, we must avoid thinking that, since others are gifted for service, we are therefore exempt. We’re not. Jesus doesn’t say, “If you have the gift of service, wash one another’s feet. But if not, don’t worry about it.” The call to servanthood isn’t the call of certain Christians. It’s the call of every Christian.

Every single one of us should be finding ways to serve others, because the more we grow in servanthood, the more we become like Jesus. We honour his command to do just as he has done by consistently finding creative ways to serve those around us. And in this era of self-isolation, there are plenty of ways to do that. It could be giving someone a call. It could be offering to bring someone groceries. It could be arranging a porch visit with someone you haven’t seen for awhile. It could be creating PPE so that our front-line workers don’t have to be unnecessarily exposed to COVID-19. There’s no end to the possibilities of serving those around us, but it’s not going to happen if we don’t take the time and effort to think about it and do it.

We live in a culture where we see almost everything around us as someone else’s responsibility. We see garbage in our parks and assume that the Parks and Rec people will pick it up. We read about seniors in need and we assume that the government will take care of them. We hear about people who are struggling from isolation and loneliness and we assume that they have their own family and friends.

Those assumptions bleed into the church as well. We see someone sitting by themselves and assume that someone else will reach out to them. We hear about someone who’s struggling and assume that the pastors will take care of them. We learn about a need and assume that someone else will meet it.

Those assumptions may all be true, but servanthood doesn’t settle for making assumptions. Instead, it actively seeks to meet needs by taking responsibility for them. True servants delight to find and even create opportunities to bless others, to meet needs, and to roll up their sleeves and serve.

The easy thing for us to do during this era of self-quarantine is to retreat rather than reach out, to take care of our own rather than take care of others. But Jesus calls us to more than that. He calls us to servanthood.

2. **Servanthood Comes Out of Love, Not Guilt**

Second, servanthood comes out of love, not guilt. Some of you may be feeling guilty right now. Guilty that you haven’t been serving. Guilty because you feel that you’ve been selfish. Guilty that you haven’t been using your time as well as you should. And as a result of that guilt, you may be resolving to change the way that you live and start living as a servant.

If you do that, what’s going to happen is you’re going to try to serve people for the next few days, and that will be good, but as soon as your guilt is gone, your service will be gone. Guilt may be a powerful motivator, but it’s powerless to bring about lasting change.

We don’t just want to be people who serve. We want to be people who are servants, because servanthood isn’t so much an act as it is an attitude. It shouldn’t just be what we do. It should be who we are. Servanthood is a way of looking at all of life, in your home, in your friendships, in your church, and in your neighbourhood. It’s the attitude of always wanting to find ways to bless and serve people, even when they’re not asking for it.

That’s what we see in John 13. The disciples weren’t asking for their feet to be washed, but Jesus did it anyways, because his service wasn’t motivated by guilt. It was motivated by love. He loved his own who were in the world, and he loved them to the end.

Guilt may be a powerful motivator, but love is the only motivator that will last. And in the long run, love will do far more than guilt, because guilt only responds to needs. Love goes out and finds them.

And so, if you find yourself lacking in the area of serving others, remember that the remedy is to grow in love. And how do we do that? By knowing the One who loved us. 1 John 4:19 says,

“We love because he first loved us.”

Love for others is birthed out of knowledge of God’s love for us. The more we know the love that God has shown to us in the gift of Jesus Christ, the more we will become loving people who serve others.

3. **Servanthood Engages the Most Menial of Tasks**

Third, servanthood engages the most menial of tasks. “Menial” means “not requiring much skill and lacking prestige.” It’s the kind of thing you do that receives little to no recognition, the kind of thing that we might lift our noses at and say, “That may be for someone else, but it’s not for me.”

But Jesus is teaching us that those are precisely the kinds of things he wants us to do for others. Those are the kinds of things he *expects* us to do for others, because as verse 16 says, “a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.” If Jesus our Master humbled himself to rub filth off of his disciples’ feet, we his servants must do the same.

In his commentary on John’s Gospel, D.A. Carson writes,

“No emissary has the right to think he is exempt from tasks cheerfully undertaken by the one who sent him, and no slave has the right to judge any menial task beneath him after his master has already performed it.” – D.A. Carson

What does this look like? What kinds of menial tasks does Jesus want us to do in service to others? It may look different for different people depending on the needs that are around you and the opportunities that you have.

But a great way to start is by developing the habit of just asking people how you can serve them.

Husbands, ask your wives how you can serve them. It could mean washing all the dishes, or changing all the dirty diapers, or vacuuming the house. Whatever expresses to your wife that you are willing to lovingly and diligently serve her will be worth your time and effort.

Children, you can ask your parents how you can serve them. Don’t settle for doing the bare minimum when it comes to your chores, but find creative ways to show your parents that you want to serve them.

Singles, don’t just stick to your peer group. Ask and see how you can serve those who are older, whether it’s your neighbours, or people in our congregation. Don’t just pass your time watching Netflix or going on social media. Call people. Message them. Find ways to show love to people by serving them.

There is so much we can do, but we won’t do any of it unless our hearts are filled with love: love for Jesus, and love for others. But the more we love Jesus, the more we will want to imitate his example by serving others. And as we do, we will experience the blessing Jesus speaks about in verse 17. He says, “Blessed are you if you do them.” It is more blessed to give than to receive, to serve, than to be served. Let us serve Christ by serving one another, that we might be blessed.

4. **Servanthood Depends on Our Identity in Christ**

Lastly, servanthood depends on our identity in Christ. We can humble ourselves to do what lacks prestige because like Jesus, we know where we come from, and we know where we’re going. We are going to the Father, and when we return to the Father, we will be welcomed as precious sons and daughters of God himself, and nothing will change that. The nature of our work won’t change that. The lowliness of our station won’t change that. We will all be welcomed in Christ by God the Father by grace, and grace alone.

The more we recognize this, the more we will be freed to serve, because we will know that our identity is not in what we do, but in who we are in Christ. We are servants of the King, who humbled himself to wash our feet. He who was clean took our filth so that we could be made clean forever.

**CONCLUSION**

Today, if you’re not sure what you believe about God, I want to encourage you to look to Christ, because in him, you won’t find a cruel tyrant. You’ll find one who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, a servant who not only washed our feet, but washed us clean by his cross.

Christ alone will serve you in your greatest need. Christ alone will save you from your sins. Come to him, and let him wash you clean, and you will receive eternal life in him.

And for my brothers and sisters in Christ, let us serve one another just as Christ has served us. Let us wash one another’s feet. Let us not shrink back from doing what our Master willingly did for us by lovingly and willingly serving one another.

We are Servants of the Servant-King, so let us serve him by serving one another, to the glory of Christ alone.