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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*Leading with the Towel*

John 13:1–17

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A team of 22 from CPC returned last Tuesday night from Honduras after serving at the Garden of Love and Hope with our mission partner Footsteps Missions. I was impressed. God assembled a well organized and talented team of people who had a set of skills and a desire to serve. Some of us specialized in just loving on the kids, playing soccer, cards, and doing arts and crafts. Some of us focused on teaching kids computer skills, sewing, and personal hygiene. Some of us came with construction skills and helped with their ongoing facility needs to improve and expand their facilities to reach more kids in the future. And a couple of us older guys taught local pastors and church leaders Bible Study methods and preached in their churches. It was a great experience for all of us. Mission accomplished because it was so well led by Albert and Fiona Lee. On behalf of our team, thank you CPC for your prayers and sending us!

It's good to be back, and with a few more probiotic capsules, I should be back to normal, if you know what I mean! It was a blessing that none of us really got sick, because we were told that there were very little in the way of medicines in the hospitals in Honduras. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, and has a totally corrupt government.

I don't speak Spanish, but one night I noticed on the TV in a café the word *Corrupt-sion*. I saw video footage of a back-hoe pulling out scoops of medical supplies from a huge hole in the ground. We learned that officials in the Ministry for Medical Care had recently been arrested because they had received money to buy more medicine for hospitals, but the medicine wasn't delivered to the hospitals and the money was missing. Apparently the officials in the Ministry for Medical Care were stealing the money and burying the medicine. And you wonder why there were protests and calls for the president of Honduras to resign. We heard that medicine was being sold on the black market and capsules filled with flour were being given to sick children as medicine.

Every one of us could stand up today and site examples of bad, corrupt, and self-serving leadership. On Thursday and Friday this week, CPC is hosting the Global Leadership Summit. We will hear amazing talks from amazing leaders who are making a difference in their churches, businesses, and non-profits. We will get equipped with new skills to apply to our current leadership challenges. We are blessed every year by GLS. It's a premiere training event for us. Our aim today is to prepare our hearts for the great training to follow later this week.

No sane person can argue that Jesus wasn't the greatest leader. It is right for us to view Jesus as the rock solid foundation for anything else that is ever said about good leadership. It is right to start with Jesus as our foundation as we continue to be built up and equipped to be better leaders. GLS will provide shape and definition to our leadership house for sure. But it's right this morning to turn our attention to the foundation. What did Jesus teach us about leadership and how did he model what he taught us?

John 13:1-17 provides us with both a theological lesson and practical lesson on Jesus' leadership.

**It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).**

It was time for the Passover, the most sacred of all the Jewish feasts. It was estimated at up to three million people were in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Word had spread that Jesus of Nazareth had raised from the dead a man named Lazarus of Bethany, and now he was on his way to the feast. The news spread like wildfire. Thousands lined the road into Jerusalem to catch a glimpse of this miracle man they hoped was the Messiah. They shouted Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David!

The people were ripe for a revolution. The Roman and Jewish leaders were *corrupt-sion*. The people shouted for a conquering hero who would liberate them with righteousness. They imagined their Savior through Old Testament imagery, and ruling with an iron scepter. A leader who will shatter unrighteous leaders, purge Jerusalem from corruption and restore God to the throne. But what they were about to learn was that their Savior was indeed in their midst, but he didn't rule with an iron scepter; he ruled with a towel.

Verse 1 says "*Jesus loves his own.*" Jesus loves his disciples and he loves you and me. What this verse doesn't explain is why he loves us. We aren't lovable, we aren't holy, we are not desirable, we are sinful, rebellious, hateful. Jesus didn't love us because we loved him first. John wrote in 1 John 4:10, "*This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.*"

The reason God loves us is because he loves us. Beyond that his love is unexplainable. But what is known to us is that the word

for “end” is “Telos” which literally means with perfection forever. He loved his disciples perfectly and he loved them their whole lives until they went to glory upon their deaths. For us as well, Jesus loves us perfectly and forever. He loves us now and all the way into his presence to be with him in glory.

Jesus saw this Passover as the critical time. He knew that his time was drawing to a close. He knew that he was to be the “Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.” In 12 hours he would be hanging on a cross. We know he dreaded it. He feared it, but he pressed on. Later in his teaching in John 15 Jesus says, *“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”* The theme of his love for his disciples, and his exhortation for his disciples to love one another, dominates the last hours of his life. You would think that in these last hours his thoughts would turn away from loving others and onto himself. Who could blame him?

**The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, 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; (John 13:2-3).**

So there is this visible world of Roman spears, religious Jews, and sacrificed lambs, but there is also an invisible world that is just as real. The Bible tells us there are spiritual powers of darkness that seek to put thoughts, lies, philosophies opposed to God into minds and hearts, and if we follow them and fail to realize that Scripture declares them to be wrong, we end up betraying God. This passage says that the devil had resolved to use Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. And Judas became complicit and was a co-conspirator in the betrayal. If you are wondering how Jesus could stay strong and keep secure with his violent death pending, look at verse 3.

This is so important for us to understand. It's foundational to who Jesus is. It's foundational to his leadership. When under pressure, Jesus remembered who he was, whose he was, and where he was going. To lead like Jesus and be people of the towel, we must embrace our identity in Christ. We must remember who we are, whose we are, and where we are going when this world is over.

## **We Must Embrace Our Identity in Christ**

If we don't know “who” and “whose” we are, we will spend most of our energy doing things to try to define our identity. And sadly nothing we can do—no promotion, accolade, no bonus, no human recognition, no new leadership principle to apply—can adequately define our identity. Why? Because our identity is not found in what we do, but in whom we are by the grace of God.

Take some time to read through Ephesians chapter 1. Verse 4 says, *“He chose us in him before the creation of the world.”* Verse 5 says, *“He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus*

*Christ.”* Verse 7 says, *“We are predestined according to his purpose.”* Verse 13 says we are *“marked with a seal the promised Holy Spirit because we believed the gospel of Jesus Christ.”*

The reason why Jesus could do what he did is because he knew that the Father had put everything under his power, and that he had come from God and that he was returning to God. When we are being called to lead and God is prompting us to lead with the towel (his way) instead of an iron scepter (the world's way), remember who you are and whose you are because you will face opposition and need to cling to your identity in Christ.

So the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Word in the flesh turned 5000 years of leadership theory on its ear with what he modeled in these next verses.

**... so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a 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 (John 13:4-5).**

One by one, Jesus washed their feet, performing the most menial and common act of service. How ironic because the next day he died a degrading death of a common criminal. John says in verse 12 that when Jesus had finished washing their feet, he took up his garments and returned to his place of honor... as we will see that Jesus was resurrected after his death to his place of honor once again seated on the throne at the right hand of his father.

In the room that night the eternal Son of God, the king of creation stripped off his garments and got on his knees to serve by washing the dirt from the feet of men who should have been serving him. This act of washing was a picture of the magnificent humiliation of Christ, the son of God, the Word becoming flesh that Paul records in Philippians 2:6-8. The early church would put these scriptures into verse and sung them as a hymn in their worship.

**Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8).**

In verses 9-11 Paul says, *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father.”* There is no doubt that John wants us to see the contrast between Jesus leading with the towel and Judas or Satan's way of leadership of personal advancement at the expense of others. A stark contrast: The humility of Christ versus the pride of Satan. The love of Christ versus the betrayal and treachery of Judas. Satan's way is described vividly in Isaiah 14:12-14. God says to Satan:

**How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.**

Satan's pride drove him to want to be like God. To be worshipped, no matter who he destroyed along the way. He was his God. His pride only allowed him to worship himself. On the other hand the pathway to greatness as a leader is to descend into greatness as servants. Satan: "I will think of myself first." Jesus: "I will think of others to the end and lay down my life for my friends."

If we want to lead like Jesus we must become people of the towel and not aspire to ascend, but aspire to descend to our Place of Service.

### **We Must Descend to Our Place of Service**

Now that sounds like a great platitude, but this wasn't easy for the disciples to learn. There is a backstory that gives us more insight into what was happening in that room that night. Luke gives us insight into the topic of conversation around the table in that early part of the dinner.

**A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves (Luke 22:24-27).**

We know that no servant was in the room to wash their feet. Jesus waited and no one stepped up to do the foot washing, so without a word he rose, took off his garments, reduced himself to the position of a slave, and kneeling in front of each disciple one by one—including Judas—he proceeded to wash 24 dirty feet and then dry them with a towel. Given what was on their minds, can you imagine the awkward silence, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, 40 minutes however long it took to wash 24 stinky feet from 12 prideful men.

I can imagine the only sounds that were heard during the foot washing was the pouring of water, the quiet breathing of Jesus; no one knew what to say. He comes to Matthew and Thomas and maybe he thinks, "How beautiful are the feet of those to proclaim the good news." He comes to Judas and maybe thinks, "this man I serve is about to betray me." Then he comes to Peter who

is horrified by what Jesus is doing. And in typical Peter fashion he opens his mouth and quickly inserts his own dirty size thirteen's.

**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" (John 13:6-8).**

Peter's protest is strong. Never Lord. You will never wash my feet! It's not right. It's unseemly. I will never understand this. Well, Peter eventually would understand after the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. But at this time in that upper room, Peter wanted Jesus to fit into his own idea of royalty, divinity, leadership. Jesus is shattering Peter's concept of greatness. By using the towel Jesus is telling us that the greatness of God means that God lives right down on earth with us. Even more the greatness of God is that God not only lives down with us, he serves us!

But John 13:1-17 is more than a practical lesson of humility. It's also a theological picture of what God does to save us. Jesus had to live with us and serve us to save us. The crucifixion of Christ was an act carried out by evil men. It was actually an act of leadership. It was worldly wisdom to solve their problem. Jesus was the threat; let's kill him and keep our power. But Jesus voluntarily sacrificed himself on the cross and proved that the wisdom of the world was in reality foolishness. And what appeared to be the foolishness of God to let his son die a shameful death was actually wisdom. Jesus' crucifixion appeared to be a scandalous death, so wrong, so unfair, but in reality it showed the power of God triumphant over death and over the power of sin. The wisdom of God reveals the foolishness of the world. If we follow the wisdom of the world we build leaders who rule with an iron scepter. If we follow the wisdom of the world we say, in order to be a good leader we must be brilliant, beautiful, articulate, educated, driven, competitive, or powerful. Peter can't see just yet that the greatest leader is a stooping figure dressed like a slave washing his big feet. It looked foolish to Peter to see "The Great I Am" kneeling before him washing his feet.

Jesus is saying, unless you let me serve you at the bottom of the ladder, there is no life for you with me. The sacrifice of my blood, my death on the cross, is what will not just clean your feet, my sacrifice will clean your heart. Peter doesn't yet get it, but verses 9-11 help Peter understand.

**"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their 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 was why he said not every one was clean...**

Jesus knows his impulsive friend Peter believes. Jesus says to Peter and all the other disciples except Judas, "You had the bath,

you are clean. You believe and my shed blood on the cross, (my ultimate stooping down) will cover you and cleanse your sin and my judgment will pass over you."

The Bible says this bath is a one-time thing that happens when we believe in Christ. In Titus 3:5 Paul calls this bath, "the washing of rebirth" or "washing of Regeneration, being born again." But Judas isn't clean because he doesn't believe. He doesn't want Jesus to serve him.

But we see something else that needs clarifying. Jesus distinguishes between a one-time bath and daily foot washing. Peter, you don't need another bath. I know you have been born again, but you do need your feet washed. Why does Peter need his feet washed? As Christians our feet get dirty daily as we walk through life. Daily we commit sins, daily we need to meet with God, confess our sins to him, thank him for his grace, and remember 1st John 1:9 that says, *"He is faithful to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

In order for us to be people of the towel and lead like Jesus we need to humble ourselves and accept the truth that we need daily foot washing by Jesus.

### **We Must Understand Our Need for Washing**

Consider this: Jesus remains with us, at the bottom rung of the ladder with us, available daily to wash our feet. He continues to lead with the towel, humbly serving us. To lead with the towel, I must not be deceived. I must know I need the towel every day. No matter how far I seem to advance in leadership, my ego and my pride still make my feet dirty every day. Jesus loves me too much to let me ignore my dangerous pride, or ignore my dangerous ego. He calls me to meet him at the bottom rung of the ladder. This king who loves me to the end finds his royal dignity in washing my feet every day.

**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.**

What I expected to read here was, "Since I your Lord washed your feet, you should wash my feet." I guess if Jesus would have said that, there would have been an all out brawl in the upper room as they fought to be the first to wash their Lord's feet. Instead Jesus said, "you should wash one another's feet."

**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, 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 (John 13:12).**

Remember what is about to happen. Jesus will be laying aside his life for us all, and the debt which we owe to him can never be paid off. But think of it this way: We are compelled to worship God by humbling ourselves to one another in loving service. Consider that our neighbors are the appointed agents authorized to receive our obedience in place for what we cannot possibly pay back our master.

### **We Must Assume Our Responsibility to Serve One Another**

And one more phrase we shouldn't overlook in verse 17. *"Now that we know these things, we are blessed when we do them."* We are blessed, we are happy if we lead with the towel. We find blessing when we turn the world's definition of leadership on its ear and lead with the towel.

Something interesting I observed when we were in Honduras at the Garden of Love and Hope: From the top down—Director, Assistant Director and teachers—all were very busy, carrying tons of leadership responsibilities. But when a child brought them a picture they had colored, a craft they had made, or just came up because they needed a hug, every staff at the Garden of Love and Hope stopped what they were doing to give their full attention to the least of these. It was an amazing and convicting sight to see Leaders being people of the towel. They gave those kids full eye contact, affirming words, and physical touch. These leaders knew their identity in Christ, they knew their place of service, they knew they needed their feet washed daily by Jesus, and they knew they were to serve one another. They were not so busy leading that they forgot why they were leading and who they were leading. It was a beautiful thing to witness.

So we will enjoy shaping and building our leadership house at Global Leadership Summit this week, but may we remember to build on the solid foundation. Jesus, the undisputed greatest leader, got on his knees, poured water into a basin and led with a towel in that upper room and says to us, "Go and do likewise." And the very next day, Jesus showed the ultimate of love and leadership. He didn't kneel down; he was nailed upright to a cross. He didn't pour out water into a basin and wash dirty feet; he poured out his blood and washed dirty hearts until they became white as snow.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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