

The Servant Messiah

There is a story of a famous athlete named Eric Liddell. Perhaps some of you have seen the movie, *Chariots of Fire*. The movie tells the story of this famous sprinter from Scotland who competes in the 1924 Olympics and goes on to win gold. To win gold in the Olympics is an amazing accomplishment, but that is not even the greatest thing Eric Liddell did. After he won the Olympics, he went back to China where he was born and worked as a missionary. He made a huge impact, particularly as a youth pastor, as he organized sports ministries and Bible studies for students. During his time in China, World War II broke out and the Japanese invaded his town. Despite being warned to flee by the British government, he stayed at the mission and continued to serve the people there. Eventually, in 1943, along with many other political prisoners and Chinese families, he was put into a prison camp. Life there was difficult, and fellow prisoners described the camp as overcrowded, dirty, and out of control. There were three toilets and three showers for 1800 people. As you might imagine, people became brutal towards each other. No one wanted to give up the little food they were given, and everyone fought for the best shelters and blankets. It was dirty, stinky, and dank.

Eric saw his circumstances as an opportunity to minister. He set up a church in the camp. Instead of hoarding supplies, he gave away what he had. He looked out for the sick in the camp and even when Winston Churchill set up a prisoner exchange to get him out of the camp, he insisted a lady and her child go in his place. He served the people relentlessly with great sacrifice until 1945, three months before the camp would be liberated; he died in camp from a brain tumor. His selfless servanthood had such an effect on everyone at the camp that his story lives on till this day. His Olympic glory was never as great as his servant life. To this day, Eric Liddell has been voted as Scotland's most popular athlete because of the power of his ministry in China.

Christian history is filled with people like this; people who give their lives away in service. Serving people has always been a mark of Christian discipleship. But what lies beneath Christian service is what makes the practice so important for us today. John chapter 13 helps us make sense of men like Eric Liddell, and gives us insight into why service is the natural outcome for those who have Christ at the center of their lives.

John, the apostle, wrote his gospel account of Jesus with this desire, "*...these (deeds) are written that you may believe that Jesus*

is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31). In other words, John wrote his gospel in order for us to believe Jesus is the Messiah. And to that end, he wrote his gospel in three parts. Part one, Jesus' public ministry among many people; the first part of John's gospel has some of the most memorable conversations in the Bible. You might remember the conversation with Nicodemus where Jesus tells him that, "Whoever believes in me will not die but will have eternal life." You might also remember the conversation with the woman at the well where Jesus tells her He offers living water and eternal forgiveness. Still, there are those famous "I am" statements; I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, so on and so forth. Part two, Jesus' ministry to his disciples in the last week of his life, and part three, Jesus' death and resurrection and His final words for His followers.

We are dropping into the story at the beginning of the second part of John. In this section, Jesus is talking to those who have left everything to follow Him, his disciples. However, in order to understand the significance of this famous story about Jesus, I want us to glance at the previous chapter for one moment. At the end of chapter 12, Jesus is publicly addressing the Jews, including the religious leaders or Pharisees, and he proclaims He is the promised Messiah of which the Old Testament foretold. He also said He must be lifted up or killed in order to fulfill His Father's work. John makes it clear the Jewish audience listening to Jesus rejected Him as this Messiah. Why? Because they had in their minds a Messiah, who would not be rejected or lifted up to die but would be triumphant. They did not want a person they saw as weak. They wanted a strong superhero type. Their culture idolized strength, winning, and honor, and the idea of a suffering servant who would be killed, shamed, and would lose was utterly incomprehensible. Our culture idolizes money, intelligence, convenience, materialism, and accomplishment. I met with someone recently, and they reminded me Christians are to seek, "that which is unseen, not that which is seen." It convicted me how much I see the gospel through a sinful lens, just like those who saw Jesus through the lens of what they wanted. The Jews wanted a practical, conquering hero and the Greeks wanted a philosophical glory. Jesus said He was not here to conquer but to be conquered for our sin. He also did not just want to change our understanding; He wanted to change our hearts.

John then reminds his readers Isaiah had predicted this in chapter 6 and chapter 53 of his prophetic oracle hundreds of

years earlier. Isaiah tells us the Messiah is someone who will not demand to be served but rather be afflicted and rejected by men. He would be seen as weak and powerless, like as what a servant was seen. And so John ends chapter 12 with Jesus proclaiming one last time, He is the Messiah sent from His Father in heaven, and anyone who believes in Him believes the Father.

In chapter 13, John skips to the last hours Jesus spent with his disciples before He was crucified. In this chapter, John shows us the way Jesus was that servant.

The Act

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.

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; 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 13:1–5)

Passover was celebrated each year with multiple rituals and a feast that was meant to remind the Jews of how God rescued them from their captivity in Egypt. It is difficult for us as modern worshippers to understand the significance of Passover in the time when Jesus lived. The city of Jerusalem swelled to six times its normal population with Jews who traveled to the city to take part in the celebrations. One estimate puts the city at 20–30,000 permanent residents, but during the Passover Festival, the city swelled by another 150,000. That would be like Levi Stadium, the Oakland Coliseum, and AT&T Park emptying full crowds onto Foster City for a few weeks. You can imagine how different that might feel. You think the parking's bad now. During the first Passover, when Israel was being held captive as slaves in Egypt, God directed His people to smear lamb's blood above their doorframes to mark houses of believers. That night, the first son of every family in Egypt died, except in the homes where the blood was above the doorframe. The Spirit of the Lord, who took the lives of the first sons, "passed over" the homes marked by the blood of the lamb. This was the final plague against Pharaoh, which led to him releasing the Jews from captivity and it's what Jews continued to celebrate every year at the Passover Festival. In fact, it is still celebrated today among Jews. And it is during this Festival when Jerusalem was bursting at the seams with Jews who have traveled far and wide to celebrate together at the Temple; we find the disciples gathering together in the Upper Room in John Chapter 13. They would look back later and realize the significance of this meal together. They were breaking bread in remembrance of God's unearned favor on the Jews during

Passover, and they were in fact dining with the Lamb of God himself, who would be slain to take away the sins of the world. By being covered in His blood, they would receive the ultimate unearned redemption from God's judgment. But let's get back to the scene from Chapter 13.

In verse 1, John writes Jesus, "*loved them to the end.*" There are two things I'd like to point out about this statement. The first thing I'd like to point out is this phrase mirrors the statement Jesus makes on the cross, "*...it is finished.*" (19:30). John is signifying the scene that follows is symbolic of the way Jesus loved them to the end by dying for them. The second is the form of the verb "love" in this statement is in the perfect tense, which can be a difficult tense to translate into English. The fact that "*loved them to the end*" is in the perfect tense could also be translated, "He loved them to the end, and He continually loves them." I'll come back to this later.

John tells us that Judas did not trust Jesus and he already had planned to reject Jesus. I'll come back to Judas later. John tells us Jesus knew He was returning to the Father. There are some who would like to say Jesus never proclaimed to be the Son of God; instead, Jesus was really just a moral example of how to live. But that's not what Jesus thought. That's not what John, the closest friend of Jesus, thought. That's not what the true church has believed for 2,000 years. John writes an important phrase, "*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...*" Jesus always knew who He was and what He was to accomplish. It was at this important time He was going to demonstrate to His disciples and us what His mission was and how we are to join in that mission.

So, Jesus rose, removed his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of his disciples. Now, this was both an ordinary and extraordinary act. It was ordinary because it was customary for hosts to have their guests' feet washed before a meal. Contrary to many paintings of this event, Jesus and the Jews were unlikely sitting at a table with chairs. Meals were often eaten lounging on pillows, and so you'd want your feet clean if they were nearby another's mouth. Hosting a meal was a big deal and guests were sure to thoroughly wash before arriving to the meal. However, on the walk to the host's house, sandal-clad feet would likely get dirty. So while the whole person was as clean as they were likely to get by standards of the culture at that time, only the feet needed cleaning once the guest arrived at the host's house. Applied to this situation, the disciples probably would have bathed prior to arriving at Jesus' meal he was hosting. Yet, as they walked the streets to the meetinghouse, wearing sandals, their feet would have been covered in dust and grime. It was customary for the host, in this case Jesus, to wash his guests' feet before starting the meal. What was extraordinary about the act, and what would

have shocked and possibly even offended the disciples is that this task was reserved for a servant. In fact, this dirty job was usually reserved for a gentile slave, as it was the lowest, most unclean job for a servant. So even Jewish servants weren't expected to do it. And yet Jesus, one who called himself the True Israelite, was now washing the feet of His disciples. Extraordinary.

As if this wasn't already shocking enough for the disciples, another detail that makes it extraordinary, almost embarrassing, is Jesus did this during the meal. The custom was they would have had their feet washed before the meal. But John writes Jesus rose from supper, poured water into a basin, wrapped a towel around His waist, and started washing the feet of his disciples. This must have been startling to the disciples. I mean, perhaps the disciples feet had already been washed. I bet some of the disciples might have started to snicker. Maybe some were embarrassed that their friend and teacher had taken off his outer robe. You might imagine some of them were thinking, "What did I walk into today?" You might imagine the social awkwardness. Whatever the case, John lets us know what Peter thinks.

The Response

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, "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. (verses 6–11)

Jesus gets to Peter and Peter responds, "*Lord, are you going to wash my feet?*" He did not understand what was going on here, and we can't entirely blame him. In fact, Jesus assures Peter the meaning of this will come in time. It's interesting Peter didn't respond when Jesus washed the other disciple's feet. However, when it came to him, Peter is shocked! There is a little false humility in Peter, as he can't let go of the fact Jesus is putting himself in the role of such a lowly servant. So he responds again, "*You shall never wash my feet.*" You could imagine this awkward exchange as Jesus is washing Peter's feet when Jesus responds, "*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*" I wish we had a photograph of the look on Peter's face after Jesus said that! So, Peter responds he wants his whole body to be washed, as Peter was totally sold out on Jesus. He had already left everything to follow Jesus, in our modern terms; Peter had already

"accepted" Jesus. Jesus responds by explaining to Peter this foot washing was not because Peter was physically dirty, after all they had already bathed that day. And it was not just regarding Peter's salvation, as Peter already trusted Jesus. Jesus already knew He was heading towards the cross to die for Peter's sin. Rather, Jesus is demonstrating to Peter what he will do for Him and what He must continually do for Him.

You see Jesus knew He was going to the cross to become dirty with His friends' sins in order that they might be bathed by His righteousness. But he also knew, in their daily walk of life, they would continually be dirtied by sin. John later wrote, "Those who claim to be without sin are liars...but he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Jesus knew they would need continual forgiveness, and continual washing away of sin in order to share untarnished intimacy with Him and to carry out their purpose as His loved ones. Remember what I said about the perfect tense of the verb love in "*loved them to the end?*" Even in his choice of verb tense, John is communicating that by washing feet; Jesus is demonstrating His eternal service, which continues beyond the cross.

John 13:12-17

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. 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. (verses 12–17)

Just after Jesus washed the feet of his disciple's, he put his clothes back on and returned to his place at the table. So let's review the order of events because the imagery here is profound. Jesus leaves the meal and removes his outer garments just as he left heaven and his place next to the Father to come to us in the form of a man. He wraps a towel around his waist just as He took on the life of a servant for the ones He came to save. He pours water into a basin as He poured Himself out on the cross. He washes his friends' feet as He washed away our sins and continually forgives us as we stumble through this life of faith. And once he finishes, he puts his former clothes back on and returns to his place as the host of the meal. When he declares on the cross "it is finished," He likewise returns to His place next to the Father and keeps us clean by His authority.

After he returns to his place, Jesus asks the disciples if they understand what He has done for them. John already lets us know the disciples (John being one of them, so he includes himself in this) did not really understand at the time what was happening. It wasn't until after Jesus' death and resurrection that

they understood completely. Of course Jesus knows this, but he asks rhetorically, so as to demonstrate something they would remember. Jesus goes on to say that while the disciples call Him Lord and Savior, they have yet to come to grips with the reality to be their savior, He has to lower himself and be a servant. Imagine why this was difficult for them to grasp. Remember what they were expecting him to do—conquer Jerusalem and take it back from the Romans in a show of force and power. How could taking on the job of the lowliest servant possibly represent a Savior?

Jesus says, “Now that I, your Lord, and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another’s feet. I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you” (verse 14).

Jesus reminds us if He is the Master and we are to follow Him, then we must become humble servants. Those of us who call ourselves His disciples are united with Jesus, and this means we are to humbly serve one another. To what extent? To the extent Jesus has served us.

Now, we cannot ignore a shady character in our story. Judas was there, having his feet washed by Jesus, listening to all. Judas looked like he fit in; after all, he had traveled around with Jesus and had seen the miracles and heard the sermons. John lets us know Judas was not clean. And here is the great sin of Judas that his pride wanted to serve his own appetites rather than be served by Jesus. The warning cannot be missed. You must let Jesus wash you completely and daily. The moment when Jesus becomes a means to get what you want is the moment when He is not your Master or Lord. One of the great indicators you know Jesus as your Lord, is if you are serving Him, not for money, prestige, acknowledgement, duty, or even for righteousness. Judas let Jesus wash his feet, probably to look like he fit in, but he never trusted Him as His savior. Be careful! Serving Jesus starts by humbling yourself to be served by Jesus. Jesus didn’t want us to just teach about washing feet; he promises blessing on those who do it! Watch as you are blessed not by becoming greater, but by becoming a servant.

So what does it mean for us?

Children, what does this mean for you? I think trash is a good example. You may have other chores at your house, but this morning I want to talk about trash. In fact, I think you should take the trash to the trashcan this week. When you take out the trash, it smells gross, and maybe it’s heavy because it has stinky diapers in it, yuck. When you take out the trash this week,

remember Jesus became like dirty, stinky trash, so we could be clean. Living like Jesus means sometimes we are going to obey our parents by taking out the trash even when you’re playing video games. It may mean you serving your friends, classmates, or co-workers by looking to their needs over your own. In this way, you serve the Lord.

Teens, I know your world revolves around friends and school. I think it would be helpful if you woke up in the morning and asked yourself this one question: when my friends and family look at me, do they see more of Jesus, or do they see more of me? If you want to follow Jesus, He must increase and you must decrease. Becoming a servant means you humble yourself to your parents and honor them when your friends seem more important. Parents it means you humble yourself as well and see God as their true Father and therefore He is in control of their lives.

Husbands and wives, how can we act humbly toward one another and serve one another in marriage in the chaos that is life? I mean where do we begin! I don’t know about you, but if daily sin is like dirt on feet, I need a pressure washer to get it all off. I think a great start in having our hearts washed is by daily confessing our sin and asking for His forgiveness. John Owen, that old puritan pastor, wrote, “Kill sin lest it be killing you.” There is something humbling about seeing ourselves in the light of the glory of salvation, which allows us to look at the wrongs we do to each other as acts to be forgiven and to look at our spouses as people to be served. Acknowledge your sin, confess your sin, and leave your sin. He is faithful to wash our hearts daily.

Church, can we humble ourselves enough to serve one another to the end? How easy is it to come to a big church like this, and remain anonymous? To never give of ourselves, even in the slightest way, let alone pouring out ourselves for each other. How easy would it have been for Eric Liddell to mail it in and get out of the prison! When the gospel is at the foremost of your heart, you will not act like your church, your spouse, or your parents exist to serve you. Rather, you will serve with the desire to honor your Lord. Jesus did the dirtiest job of all time, and He is our Lord and Master. He came to serve not to be served. Blessed are we when we follow Him.

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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