



Sermon Study Guide
The Beginning of the End: The Son Who Came to Serve
John 13:1-20
****Study Questions in Italics**

Introduction: Where are all the servant leaders?

- In an article for the Harvard Business School, professor James Heskett wonders why servant leadership is so unpopular. He surveyed a lot of literature on the topic, and the answers vary. Some argue that servant leadership doesn't produce the short-term results companies need. Others argue that it requires courage *and* humility—two character traits not often found in the same person. But one reason is especially telling: “servant leadership is not prevalent because it is a Utopian approach that requires a complete paradigm shift for most modern day employees at any level.” In short, servant leadership only exists in a dream world!
- And yet, in John's gospel, we find a perfect servant-leader, Jesus Christ. And not only that, he calls his disciples to follow his example. This is a radical approach to life, but it is possible. John 13:1-20 speaks with greater clarity than any other text regarding the need to be marked by service.
- *What do you think it means to be a servant leader? Why do we see so little of it in the world today?*
- To understand Jesus as the servant leader *par excellence* we need to notice three things about his ministry. This text is full of reminders that Judas betrayed him. I'll save discussion about the betrayal until the study on John 13:21-30.
- Carefully read John 13:1-20.

First, Christ's amazing love.

- In verse 1 is a summary statement for the rest of John. Jesus knows the cross is near and he wants to prepare his closest disciples for his death. He is about to serve them by washing their feet and ultimately by dying for their sins. But why? What would motivate Jesus to pour himself out for this small band of sinners?
- The answer is his love, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Jesus' love for his disciples then is like God's love for his children now. What can we say about this love?
 - First, it's an independent love. God's love for us is not a response to our love for him (1 John 4:19). He loved us when we were still his enemies.
 - Second, it's a mysterious love. When you really understand God's love for you, you can't help but ask, “Why me?” When someone hires you for a job, it's because you met certain qualifications. But God didn't save us because we were somehow worthy of being saved—it's because of his love (see Deut 7:7-8; Eph 2:4-5).
 - Third, it's an unstoppable love. Jesus loved them to the end—all the way to the cross. He loved his disciples even when they abandoned him. God's love is like that. It persists. He forever and fully loves his children.
- *Is it hard for people to understand and accept the nature of God's love for his children? Why does John make sure we know that Jesus loved his disciples to the end?*

Second, Christ's cleansing sacrifice. Re-read John 13:2-11.

- Look carefully at verse 3. We are told that Jesus knew he'd been given "all things" and that he'd shortly be returning to be with his Father. Jesus was well aware that he is the Lord of the Universe and Heir of All things. He knew that all creation existed for him (Col 1:16-18). Aware that he deserved all glory, it's amazing that Jesus stripped off his clothes, put a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples' feet.
- Peter objected at first. He somehow knew that he should be washing Jesus' feet. Jesus tells him he won't immediately understand what's going on, but one day he will (v. 7). Peter still objects, until finally Jesus tells him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." In other words, Peter has to be washed in order to be Christ's disciple. In response, Peter concludes that Jesus should wash *all* of him. But Peter doesn't understand that the washing of his feet was symbolic of the forgiveness of sin that will be accomplished at the cross.
- The Old Testament often equates sin of the heart to a dirty stain on the body. In Psalm 51, when David prays for forgiveness, he asks God to "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (51:2). This is what Jesus did on the cross. When he took our punishment, he washed away our sin.
- It should stun us that the Lord of the Universe would humble himself by washing his disciples feet. It should stun us even more that Jesus would come in the flesh and die on the cross to wash our sins away. But this is exactly what he did. Carefully read Philippians 2:5-10.
- *What does it mean to have your sins washed away? Why did God have to take on flesh in order to accomplish this?*

Third, Christ's humble example. Re-read John 13:12-17.

- If Jesus is our Lord, if we are truly committed to him, we will serve others. We must follow his example of humble service. Most Christians throughout history have agreed that the call in verse 14 is not a perpetual command to wash feet but to humbly serve.
- There are thousands of examples of humble service. But what do we need to know in order to properly follow Jesus' example?
 - First, your service should always be motivated by love.
 - Jesus' service of the disciples was motivated by love (v. 1). Paul makes it clear that if you serve with out love your service gains you nothing (1 Cor. 13:3). Pray, therefore, that God would give you a love for others. We don't tend to love people we don't know—so take the time to get to know others.
 - *Do you struggle to love others? Why or why not? What can you do to love others more? How is it obvious when someone loves someone else?*
 - Second, your service should regularly involve sacrifice.
 - This is the result of passage like Mark 9:35, John 12: 25, and Jesus' example of washing the disciples' feet and dying on the cross. When we serve, we should be willing to give up something valuable (time, finances, prestige) in the service of others.
 - *What are some things you can give up in the service of others? Name one or two practical ways that you can sacrificially serve in the coming week.*
 - Third, your service should be verbal.
 - Jesus told Peter that one day the disciples would understand what he was doing by washing their feet. One day they would see that this foot washing was really a picture of the gospel. This small group of disciples would be sent out to verbally testify that Jesus had served them by dying on the cross. Therefore, if we are to follow Jesus' example in humble service, we need to

explain—with words—why we are serving. We need to tell people that we serve because Christ first served us on the cross.

- *Do you find it easier to share the gospel with words or simply serve others with actions? How can you serve a neighbor and let them know why you are doing it? Is it possible to truly serve someone without telling him or her why you are serving?*
- Fourth, your service should be church-centered.
 - Look carefully at verse 14. Jesus called the disciples to wash the feet of “one another.” It seems that Jesus is especially concerned that his disciples’ care for each other. This does not mean we should ignore our non-Christian neighbors. Galatians 6:10, for example, exhorts us to do good to everyone! But there is a unique call for Christians to serve Christians. And here’s why: if Jesus loved the church enough to die for her, then his followers express a similar love and servant’s heart for the church.
 - *How do you see service take place in the context of a local church? What are some barriers to service in the church? Why do some people seem to serve so much and others so little? What can we do as a church to encourage people in their service?*
- Fifth, your service should be gospel-driven.
 - The amazing thing about Christianity is that it doesn’t start with our service, but with Christ’s. Before you can ever be a servant of Jesus, you have to be served by Jesus. If you are struggling to serve the way you want to, maybe you need to get back to the cross, throw yourself upon the mercy of Christ, and explore the significance of his death for sinners. His gospel should drive you to serve others.
 - *How is gospel-driven service different from other kinds of service? Other than the gospel, what tends to motivate you to serve others? How can you change your service so that it is more gospel-driven?*

Conclusion: The world may not think servant leadership is possible, but as the church, we know better. We know that Jesus served us so *that* we would serve others.