

Text: John 13:1-17¹

Title: Stooping To a Higher Level

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

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A chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company had just visited his doctor. The news wasn't good – a terminal disease. Knowing that his time on earth was coming to an end, he stared thinking, "What is the most important principle I can teach my associates?" He was a model executive, for he really cared about those who worked closely with him.

He called together his corporate vice-presidents for a special luncheon meeting to brief them on his health and how he foresaw his death affecting the company. Before he had even started the meeting, a disagreement arose among them as to which man carried the most weight. To them, authority was equated with position. The CEO now knew what he needed to teach the man. He interrupted the discussion and told them about his health, and how he expected the company to be run after his death.

Then he did a very strange thing. Having sent for a shoeshine kit which he kept in his office, he proceeded to shine their shoes! The room was silent – no one knew what to say. When he came to the man most likely to succeed him, that man refused the shine, saying it was beneath the dignity of the CEO to do such a thing. The CEO replied, "If you don't let me shine your shoes, then clean out your desk – you're outta here." Because the man greatly respected his boss, he told him to do whatever he wanted.

After each man's shoes were shined, he told the group that the most important thing he wanted to leave with them was demonstrated by the shining of their shoes. The principle was this:

When you stoop to serve, you raise the level of your leadership

Those of you who know the events of the life of Jesus easily recognize this story as a modern version of Jesus' actions recorded in John 13.

Let me give you the background to that event:

- The story takes place at the end of Jesus' ministry – in fact, it probably takes place the day before he goes to the cross
- It's the very last meal he will have with his disciples before he is crucified – a time of parting, although they don't fully realize it yet.

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- Jesus often ate with his disciples – after his death and resurrection, it was while he was eating with them that two of them recognized Jesus (Luke 24:30, 25) – that’s an indication of how important these meals were in his relationship with them
- during the meal a dispute breaks out between two of the disciples over which of them was the greatest and who had the most authority (Luke 22:24)

Talk about wrecking the mood! Jesus was about to die and they were already squabbling over who was going to be in charge! But what could be expected? These disciples had grown up in a culture that honored power and mocked service. They had seen how things worked in the world around them. But their bickering moved Jesus to teach them one of his most important lessons about leadership.

Luke & Matthew’s account of this incident focuses on the lesson that Jesus drew out. He said to his disciples...

“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” Luke 22:25-26

That’s the essence of the lesson. It’s a lesson in what is called “**servant leadership**.” John, however, records for us the action parable that Jesus performed to illustrate and demonstrate this teaching.

As I read God’s Word, I invite you to picture the scene with me. Jesus and the twelve disciples are gathered together to eat their last meal together, the Passover supper meal. Its evening and the room is lit by the soft glow of oil lamps. The meal has been consumed but the aroma of roast lamb hangs in the air. The rising and falling hum of conversation fills the room as the disciples talk amongst themselves. Then, John tells us...

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” John 13:2-9

Then, as he so often did, Jesus invited his disciples to interpret his action parable:

“When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your 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 to you.” John 13:12-15

Washing feet was the work of a house servant. It was a menial task, but Jesus did it. It was a servant’s work, but Jesus did it.

Let me step out of this story for a moment and ask you a similar question to the one which Jesus asked that night. Do you understand why I’m telling you this story today? We should be looking at 1 Timothy chapter three, verses eight to thirteen which gives us Paul’s instruction on the qualities to look for when selecting “deacons.” Why would I turn to this story and this teaching in the flow of our study in 1 Timothy? It’s because if we miss what Jesus is saying here we will severely misunderstand Paul’s instruction to us about the nature of church leadership.

Last week, we looked at Paul’s instruction on selecting elders or overseers as leaders for the church, God’s house. The role of the overseers is to “oversee” the life of the church. The overseers were the primary leadership team in the New Testament church and I believe that that is still true for the church today. One of the major pitfalls that lie in wait for those who provide leadership for the church as overseers is the temptation to lead as “lords” rather than as servants. Those of us who serve in church leadership constantly need to be on our guard against that temptation.

Peter, one of the men at the supper meal with Jesus that night in Jerusalem, remembered Jesus’ words and understood their application to the work of elders in the church. Years later he wrote to a group of church leaders...

**“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers ... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”
1 Peter 5:1-3 (NIV)**

Notice that phrase, “not lording it over.” That’s exactly what Jesus told him at the supper in Jerusalem. Peter got it! Although elders over see the Body of Christ, they are not to “lord it over” those who are “under” our care. They are to lead as servants.

And what about the “deacons” in 1 Timothy? Well, the connection with Jesus teaching is even more direct in their case. Jesus said...

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

Jesus called himself “the one who serves.” The phrase is a translation of the Greek word, **diakoneo**. Do you hear the word “deacon” in there? The word “**deacon**” simply means, “**servant**.” You see, whether you’re an elder/overseer or a deacon in God’s house, you’re a servant to God and his church. And Jesus’ example of service wasn’t given only for church leaders; Jesus intends it to be the way of life for every believer. The servant mindset is woven into every aspect of our lives because we are followers of “the one who serves.” Christian husbands need to incorporate servant leadership into the way they lead their families. Christian employers need to weave it into the way they lead their businesses. Christian coaches need to apply it to the way they lead their teams. Christian teachers are to apply the principle to the way they lead their students. I could add Christian politicians and police officers; in fact, followers of Jesus in any leadership position. Every believer is to ask themselves: how do I follow the example of “The One Who Serves” in my relationships? The servant mindset is to touch every area of our lives.

The servant mindset has to be one of the most demanding lessons to learn in all of God’s Word. Someone once said that you don’t know whether or not you’ve developed a servant mindset until you see how you react when someone treats you like one. In my experience, developing the servant mind requires that I return again and again to the example of Jesus and learn from him. I invite you to do that with me this morning. If you’re a follower of Christ who has been called to give leadership in the church or in some other place in society or if you’re a believer who is seeking to develop the servant mind of Jesus in your relationships, we need to come again and again to Jesus and learn from him.

There are three elements of the servant mindset that I think we need to revisit regularly.

We develop a servant mindset by knowing our identity in Christ...and releasing it!

Jesus knew who he was...

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands” John 13:3

Jesus had all things under his power. He was the **reigning Lord of heaven**.

Do you know who reigns over your life? When we become believers in Christ, we become citizens of a heavenly kingdom in which Christ reigns. The Bible tells us that God...

“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Colossians 1:13-14

Jesus knew where he came from...

“Jesus, knowing that ... he had come from God” John 13:3

Jesus was from the Father. He was, and is, the **Son of God**, eternal with the Father.

Do you know whose child you are? When we believe in Jesus we become members of that eternal, forever family. The Bible tells us that when we believe in Jesus, we become children of God.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:12-13

Jesus knew where he was going...

“Jesus, knowing that ... he was going back to God...” John 13:3

After his life on earth, Jesus returned to the Father, to receive the glory he had with him from before the world began.

Do you know where home is? The Bible tells us that our real home is where Jesus is. There is a day when Jesus will return to earth and when he does...

“Then we ... will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” 1 Thessalonians 4:17

We are citizens of heaven, children of God and bound for glory ... what does that mean for us? Well, what did it mean for Jesus?

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God....” John 13:3

If you read this statement without knowing what happened next, what action would you anticipate from Jesus?
Some regal act of declaration?

Some strong action of authority?
 Some out-shining of divine glory?
 But instead, Jesus picked up a basin and towel and began washing dirty feet!

Jesus' whole earthly life, from his birth in the manger of Bethlehem to his death on the cross outside Jerusalem, is the story of his choosing the role of a servant even though he was a Ruler by right.

Paul captured the scope of Jesus' story in Philippians chapter 2. He wrote about how Christ abandoned his glory to become a servant...

“[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” Philippians 2:6-7

And the lesson in Jesus' releasing of his glory for us is that we are to...

**“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...”
 Philippians 2:5**

Jesus summarized the servant priority of his life when he said...

“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. 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 10:43-45

Can he be any clearer? If we follow “The One Who Serves,” we serve.

Many of you probably have family crests or shields. You can buy them in fine shopping malls everywhere. The Reilly family has one ... at least someone named “Reilly” has a crest. I'm not so sure about my branch of the family, though. But if the family of God had a crest, what would it be? What heraldic symbol would it display? A lamb? A cross? Probably. But I think one of the major emblems on Jesus' family crest would be the basin & towel because he came as “The One Who Serves.”

When King Hussein of Jordan died in early 1999, he was eulogized as a peacemaker and a sensitive leader. One incident early in his reign demonstrated the servant-hearted approach to leadership that accounted for his success as a world figure. From the beginning, he tried to get down on the level of his subjects in order to understand their needs and respond accordingly to them. Late at night the young king (disguised in street clothes) secretly left the palace. With the help of a friend, he borrowed a taxi and pretended to be a cab driver. In the early hours of the morning, the king drove through the streets of Amman and picked up fares. As his passengers sat in the back seat (unaware of the true identity of the

driver), the king asked about their hopes and concerns. He even asked what they thought of the new king who had come into power.

In order to be servants for the needs of others, we need to know our identity, as Jesus knew his, and released it! We have been born into **the family of the Servant King** and **when we stoop to serve, we raise the level of our leadership.**

Secondly,

We develop a servant mindset by ... being willing to be served!

It's a bit of a strange twist. After telling you that we need to be servants, now I tell you that we need to be willing to be served. How is that?

John tells us that as supper was served Jesus began to wash the disciples feet. That in itself is strange but what is very odd is that none of the disciples objected to Jesus washing their feet, until Jesus got to Peter.

Remember that these men had been arguing about who was the "greatest" among them. For any of the disciples to have taken up the towel and washed feet would have been equivalent to admitting defeat in their argument about who was the greatest. But Jesus, the one who was truly the greatest among them, was doing what only the lowliest person would do. I'm sure their minds were racing; they were probably confused, embarrassed and unsure of what to do or say in the face of Jesus' condescension to them. Nobody said anything, until Jesus got to Peter.

Notice his words...

"Lord, do you wash my feet?" John 13:6

There's the key word: "Lord." Peter is stunned. "Lords" don't behave this way! "Lords" don't wash feet!

The literal translation of his objection is: "**Absolutely never will you wash my feet for eternity!**" (v.8) Never say never, Peter! Jesus replied...

"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." John 13:8

What Jesus was saying was that if Peter did not allow him to wash him, he was not one of his disciples and for Peter, that was unthinkable!

Notice that Jesus said "If I do not wash you" not "If I do not wash your feet." There is a whole other dimension to Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet which I'm not going to address this morning. In washing their feet, Jesus was also picturing the washing from sin that he was about to perform through the shedding

of his blood on the cross. In Jesus' day, lords didn't wash feet but neither did lords die on crosses for the sins of all humanity – but the Lord Jesus Christ did both. The washing from sin is a wonderful truth but please permit me to set that glorious teaching aside this morning and focus on the servant lesson that Jesus was teaching in the washing of feet.

Except to say this: please understand that the lesson of the washed feet that Jesus teaches us is a lesson for those who have already been washed head to toe by the forgiveness found in Jesus' blood shed on the cross. This is not a lesson in how to become a follower of "The One Who Serves." This is a lesson for those who already are followers of Jesus.

Peter's great love and loyalty for Christ overwhelmed his reluctance and he said...

“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” John 13:9

One of the great enemies of the servant mindset is pride. Pride simply can't co-exist with the kind of humble servant attitude that Jesus wants us to develop. Peter viewed leadership as an “up and down” structure—the higher you are, the more authority you have; the more authority you have, the more you are served. Serving is down; being served is up. Jesus, the lord, should be served and his mind couldn't conceive of a lord who served. But Jesus is the Servant King and in his kingdom everything is reversed: serving is up; being served is down.

It is very difficult to be served when you see yourself as “the leader.” Pastors and church leaders often struggle with this – it's very humbling to recognize our need to be ministered to by others. Leaders can develop the false view that others need them more than they need others. It's strange to think that pride can hide itself under the uniform of a servant but it's true.

Richard McDonald and his brother Maurice started a drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California, in the late forties. It featured 15-cent hamburgers, 19-cent cheeseburgers, 20-cent milkshakes, and 10-cent fries. Within a few years business mogul Ray Kroc bought the proprietary rights, and the McDonalds fast-food industry was born.

When Richard McDonald died in the summer of 1998 at the age of eighty-nine, it was revealed that the namesake of the most famous fast-food chain in history frequently ate at the McDonalds near his home. He always ordered a cheeseburger, a shake, and an order of fries. But, much to the chagrin of his grandchildren, McDonald never identified himself to the employees, never cut in line, and always paid full price.

Even though the man invented the restaurant, he allowed himself to be served by young people who probably were just starting out in their first job, never

holding his identity over them. Rather, he hid his identity so that others could serve him.

Servants must be willing to be served, which means not only for others to literally serve us, but to allow Jesus to serve us by his daily cleansing and forgiveness. Only in that condition are we able to truly serve others in the spirit of Christ, for **when we stoop to serve, we raise the level of our leadership.**

Finally,

We develop a servant mindset by ... serving

Jesus introduces a question designed to make the disciples think...

“Do you understand what I have done to you?” John 13:12

Then, he drives the point home...

“If I then, your 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 to you.” John 13:14-15

Why weren’t they willing to wash the feet of their friends? F.B. Meyer suggests two reasons: **“This failure arises partly because we do not love with a love like Christ’s—a love which will brave resentment, annoyance, rebuke, in its quest—and partly because we are not willing to stoop low enough.”** Jesus, their “Teacher and Lord,” stooped low enough for them. Now, all he asked was that they follow his example as their Master and stoop low enough for one another.

By “one another” he meant not just the Twelve, but all people, including and especially their own families. Husbands and wives are to serve one another; adult children are to serve their parents; brothers and sisters are to serve one another; church leaders and congregations are to serve one another.

Serving includes having a right spirit toward others. As I said earlier, one of the best ways to discern whether or not we’re developing a servant mindset is to take note of how we respond when people treat us like servants. A spirit of servanthood is not present when:

- ◆ a player who isn’t chosen to start quits the team;
- ◆ we are passed over for a promotion we think we deserve and we withdraw our best effort from our employer;
- ◆ the worship team leader doesn’t give us a solo and we think about quitting;
- ◆ a neighbor “slights” us and we begin to find fault with them.

Jesus concludes his teaching by saying on the servant mindset by making a promise...

“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” John 13:17

Jesus actually promises that acting as a servant will reap rewards for those who humble themselves and stoop to the position in both body and spirit. How? Let me tell you about how Rita & Geri Redekop, former CBM missionaries in Brazil, experienced it in their Brazilian church. Rita wrote...

“Maria Julia is 72 years old and blind. She has been blind the past 16 years of her life because of improper attention to her eyes. Maria began coming to one of the Baptist Churches in Marabá, about three years ago with her daughter Julia.

“Maria Julia is often very dirty, and her hair has been falling out in huge chunks, leaving big gaps of skin showing through her thinly woven hair. She has an aroma that often keeps people at a distance. Her feet are swollen and crusted over so much that wearing shoes is impossible and she walks barefoot or with a small pair of rubber sandals. She is usually avoided by everyone so seldom speaks. She is dragged along by the hand and told where to sit and then left until the service is over.

“This past year Geri was doing a series of studies and practical applications on the gifts of the Spirit. On the week that he spoke on the gift of service, he used foot washing as a practical application. Several people took turns washing the feet of others. It was a very moving service and the presence of God was felt so much in that little church that night.

“As the service was coming to an end with nearly everyone having received a blessing through the footwashing, our daughter Joeline got up and walked over to Maria Julia. There was a quiet murmur as she spoke and suddenly there was silence as the two rose together and Joeline led Maria Julia to the front where she knelt before Maria Julia and washed her crusty, dirty feet. The silence was not broken until she arose and led Maria Julia back to her chair – then we heard soft sobbing as one by one, people began to weep. We all wept together as God’s Spirit moved us. There were many repentant souls that night as we realized as a church, that we had been avoiding one of God’s chosen. There were no excuses offered but one by one people lined up to embrace this lady. As we watched mother and daughter embrace with tears running down both their faces, we felt that healing was taking place and a new beginning had arrived.”

Jesus set the example. He promises blessing. Jesus wants to care and serve people through us! He wants to bless us and others as we stoop to serve.

Washing someone’s feet might not be the most effective way to meet the needs of the people that you know, but consider some of these expressions of service:

- ◆ provide a meal to a family that is going through a difficulty time;

- ◆ help a neighbor with lawn care, yard cleanup or shoveling snow;
- ◆ provide babysitting for a neighbor who needs some relief;
- ◆ give clothing and toys that your children have outgrown to a needy family;
- ◆ offer to take a short walk with an elderly neighbor or drive them to doctor's appointments; or
- ◆ assist a struggling classmate with a difficult assignment.

When you stoop to serve, you raise the level of your leadership

“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” John 13:17

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** Make Me a Servant (#669)

**Make me a servant, humble and meek;
Lord, let me lift up those who are weak.
And may the prayer of my heart
always be:
Make me a servant,
Make me a servant,
Make me a servant today.**

- **Benediction**