

Christ's Example of Servanthood
(John 13:1 - 14:7)

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Introduction

I recently went to a Larry Crabb seminar where he talked about dealing with emotional problems and how to cope in an evil world. He talked about ministering to other people instead of manipulating them to meet our needs. He had lots of good things to say, and since that seminar, those topics have been on my mind a lot.

I also know that one of the things my Dad has been stressing in his teaching is how our goal is not just to be happy, well-adjusted Christians. We are to be that way so we will be able to minister to others.

As I was reading John 13, I realized that this chapter has a lot to say about that subject. So today we are going to work through John 13: and part of chapter 14: to see what principles we can learn about servanthood.

We might divide our passage into the following major sections:

I. Christ's example of service 13:1-5

II. The basis of our service

A. Dealing with the past 13:6-20

B. Dealing with the future 13:33-14:7

Argument

I. Christ's Example of Service

Whenever you read a passage of Scripture, you need to look at the verbs and participles because they often give you an outline for the section and help you understand the main ideas. That is what we are going to follow in this first section.

The key participles are "knowing" and "having loved" in verse 1, "during" in verse 2 and "knowing" in verse 3. And the key verbs are "He rose" and "He laid aside" and "He girded" in verse 4.

First let us look at the four participles. Three of them are causal participles which means they show us the cause or reason that Christ did what He did. So we could translate these as, "because He knew, ..." "because He loved them ..." etc.

A. The Reasons

1. *Because He knew he was going to the Father*

Notice first that it says in 13:1 "Knowing that His hour had come." If you were to read the first twelve chapters, you would continually see that John says, "His hour had not yet come" (2:4; 7:30; 8:20). But here we are on the eve of the crucifixion. Christ was about to be crucified and He knew it. That is a very important point because this whole event needs to be seen with that in mind. We see that Christ was not having a pity party and upset about what was going to happen to him.

Principle: No matter how bad things are going for us, we have no excuse for not serving others.

Sometimes we feel we can't take on anybody else's trouble because we are overwhelmed with our own trouble.

Don't we often think that somehow others ought to help us because our life is so bad at the moment. After all we deserve it... Maybe we are broke. Maybe we are sick. You pick the problem, but what happens is we get our eyes on ourselves and on our problems and we don't even see the needs of others, nor are we in the right frame of mind to help others even if their needs were made known to us.

The problem is we have a natural tendency to be self*ish* and we need to be self*less*.

Another interesting thing to notice is, if you read the whole NT you will not find any reference to Christ laughing or smiling. But you do see Him crying and sorrowful. All references to laughing say something like, "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25).

I'm not trying to be a killjoy, but what this tells me is living in a fallen world is not very pleasant. We see the pain and rejection that Jesus, Paul and others faced, but we also see how they operated in spite of it. So we need to know what to expect in this life and not be surprised by it and most of all, live above it.

What is the reason Christ was not feeling sorry for himself?

Notice what the verse says. What did He know? He knew it was time for Him to depart out of this world and go back to the Father. Notice what the verse doesn't say. It doesn't say, "Knowing that He was about to die ..."

I'm sure Christ knew He was about to suffer a horrible death, but we see that His focus is not on the bad aspect of departing the world — the pain and suffering. It is on the good part. He is going to be with the Father again. That is the emphasis of the phrase "to the Father." That is what Christ is thinking about.

It helped him face death and not be overwhelmed by it.

2. Because He loved them completely

It also says in verse 1, "having loved them to the end." This could mean he loved them until the end, but the Greek word for "end" could also mean "completely" and so this probably should be better translated, "He loved them completely."

What Christ is about to do is the result of His love. And this shows us that love is one motivation for service.

3. He lived above circumstances

The word "during" in verse 2 is the next participle but it is not causal. It shows the time of the event.

There were two things going on at that time:

- The first thing was the supper, and I'm going to discuss that when we get to verse 4.
- The second thing is the betrayal. What we see is that Judas already planned to betray Christ. Christ knew it but it did not stop Him from serving them.

Principle: The presence of evil did not hinder love.

This evil was directed at Christ, but we see that He did not react to Judas. He continued with His attitude and actions of love and service.

Our reaction to evil in the world and evil that is done to us is what counts. We cannot use our environment as an excuse for our problems. If we were abused by our parents, if we had a weak father and a dominant mother, these things do not excuse the way we are. We are the way we are because we reacted to our environment badly.

We see Christ lived above circumstances. He **acted** rightly.

Verse 3 continues to tell us why Christ was able to live above circumstances.

4. Because He knew who He was

First, it says "knowing ..." I think this is significant because how often do we know something but don't act on it. Intellectually we know it is true, but we don't really believe it. Either we think we are special and it doesn't apply, or we just refuse to change.

Christ knew something, and He believed it and acted upon it. Verse 4 goes with verse 3 and it says, "Knowing _____ he did _____." His knowledge was the basis of His actions.

What did He know?

(a) He knew “that the Father had given all things into His hands.”

Eph. 1:22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,

Heb. 2:8 Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him.

Christ counted on something that hadn't actually taken place yet. He was looking to the future. And He acted accordingly. Satan was still out and about causing problems, but we don't see Jesus saying, “Hey, God, I thought you said you would take care of that.” He knew God had promised to take care of it and would when He thought the time was right. If you will remember, even the Son of Man does not know the exact time that God will bring this world to an end.

He knew He had to live on earth and face tough times for a little while longer. But even though circumstances weren't exactly in His favor, He acted like they were. When I use the word “acted,” I don't mean He pretended like they were. I mean His actions showed He believed they were. He knew what the Father had said and He wasn't worried.

(b) He knew “that He had come forth from God and was going back to God.”

Christ had no identity crisis. He was not dependent on the opinions of others for His self identity. This gave Him the freedom to serve others.

That is why the disciples wouldn't wash each other's feet. They were afraid of what others would think. Their self-image was formed by others' opinions.

All the new books about having a good self-image have probably over-emphasized the topic, but it really is important to have a good one. But the most important thing is to have a Biblical self-image. This means you know you are secure and valuable because God loves you, not because others like you or think highly of you.

So now we have looked at the participles and seen the reasons Christ was able to serve the disciples. Next we get to the regular verbs. Now we see the action.

B. The Actions

1. He rose from supper

The phrases “during supper” in verse 2 and “rose from supper” in verse 4 are significant because normally foot washing was the first thing done when one entered the tent or house. You've probably already heard that people just threw their garbage and other worse things out into the street. So feet covered only by sandals got pretty dirty. In this case, there were no servants present, and we see that they were all the way into the meal, and no one had done this service for the others. Why?

(a) I think this shows that Jesus waited for the disciples to do it first. When it was obvious that no one was, then He took the servant's job. I'm sure He didn't do it with the attitude, “Oh well, since nobody else will do it I guess I will...” I'm sure He did it gladly. He just wanted the others to have a chance.

(b) I'm sure the disciples were too proud. We know they were concerned about their place in heaven, and probably concerned about who got to sit next to Jesus at the dinner table. They certainly were not going to be humiliated by doing a servant's job and wash everyone else's feet.

2. He laid aside His garments

In contrast to the disciples, we have Jesus' attitude. He laid aside His garments and that is symbolic of Him laying aside His position. What is the ultimate thing that Christ laid aside. Nowhere is it stated better than in Phil. 2:5-8.

2:5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed *in the form of God*, did not regard *equality with God* a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Some translations say Christ did not hold on to His equality or cling to His rights as God. But they are missing the point here. Christ never gave up His equality with God. Christ was in essence and being equal with God, but He did not want to become functionally equal to God. He subordinated Himself to the will of God the Father.

The disciples were also in essence, equal to one another, but they were unwilling to become functionally inferior. They instead wanted to steal the position of superiority from the others. For instance, compare:

Matt 20:20-22 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him.

21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left." 22 But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able."

Mark 9:33-34 And they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.

Luke 22:24 And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest.

So we see their basic attitude, and we see Christ's attitude of servanthood.

3. He girded Himself about

He continues with the clothing symbolism. The imagery in the phrase, "He girded Himself about" is that of putting on the servant's apron, adopting a servant's role and performing a servant's task.

Although He was superior to them, He laid aside His rightful position and took up the servant's position.

So, we see that Jesus has given them an example of service and now He must teach them some things that are necessary to know and do before they can follow His example and serve others.

II. The Basis of Service

In the first section He teaches them about being in fellowship with Him. Then there is a break while He sends Judas out to do his evil mission and then, in the second section, He tells them of His departure and gives them hope for the future when they will join Him in heaven.

We will concentrate on the first and last section.

We need to understand that the next two sections are essential to having the servant's heart and the ability to serve. The first section shows that we need to deal with our past — we need to be cleansed. The second section tells how we deal with the future. When these two areas are settled in our mind, that frees us up to serve others.

Read verses 6-11.

A. Having a Clean Heart¹ — Dealing With the Past

How are we cleansed?

What does this act of washing the feet signify?

From the Greek text we see that two Greek words are used for washing. Verse 10 makes that clear in the NASB and NIV but the KJV translated both as wash. One word means to bathe (louw) and the other means to wash (niptw). By way of correlation there are two spiritual washings:

First is the bath of regeneration. This happens when we are saved. When we come to the recognition that we are sinners with no hope of ever earning God's approval, and we then trust in Christ's death and resurrection. Then we are welcomed into the family of God. Then we become Christians.

The second spiritual washing is performed when we confess our sins like in 1 John 1:9.

This is what the foot washing symbolizes. That is why Christ says the one who has bathed (is saved) needs only to wash his feet (confess his sins).

Notice also that He says, “and you are clean, but not all of you.” John explains this in verse 11. Judas had never had a bath. He did not believe in Christ.

Christ then sits down and explains what He has just done. Read verses 12-17.

How does this relate to us?

The most obvious application is that we are to serve others... 13:15 plainly says that Christ did it as an example for us to follow.

I think this also shows us how we are to relate to our world. In spite of our personal problems, in spite of the evil around us and the evil that has been done to us, we still have the responsibility to act correctly and minister to others. Too often we **react** wrongly—we have anger or bitterness at those who have wronged us. We try to manipulate those around us so that we don't get hurt again. We need to confess our wrong reactions, and then take the right course of action.

I have learned over the past few months that this is one of the keys to effective counseling. The process is like this:

The first step is helping a person uncover the past so they can see how they were mistreated. Not so they can be mad at the one who mistreated them, but so they can do the second step.

The second step is helping the person understand how they reacted wrongly to the mistreatment or abuse.

The third step is bringing the person to the point where they can confess their wrong reaction.

Then with a clean slate, they can move on with their life and learn how to correctly handle these bad memories and learn how to cope with life.

So confession is a very important step. Let's talk about confession for a minute.

To confess our sin means to say the same thing about our condition that God does. We must agree with God that it is wrong and that there is no way for self-justification.

First we must believe that there is no sin too big for God to forgive. Erwin Lutzer says, “We may even believe that it is a mark of humility to think that our sins are greater than God's grace. But if we doubt God's ability to forgive, that's pride and unbelief, not humility.”

Whenever we think we have sinned too greatly to be forgiven, we are doubting the foresight of God. We are assuming that He did not consider the particularly scandalous sins that we would commit.

Second we must believe that God is faithful and will keep His promise to forgive.

What is the purpose of cleansing?

To have fellowship with God.

Verse 8 shows that without confession we have no fellowship with God. Without God we are left to our own resources. Jeremiah 2:13 says we hew for ourselves broken cisterns that can hold no water. Those broken cisterns are our own methods of handling life — being shy, or outgoing, an alcoholic or addict, etc. But the cisterns are broken. We can't make it on our own.

What are some reasons why Christians don't confess and consequently live out of fellowship with Christ?

Immaturity — They have the attitude, “I'm going to mess up anyway.” So they let the sins pile up. Some don't realize the need to confess regularly. Some call it “keeping short accounts with God.” Don't wait until you have a whole bunch of sins saved up like going to consumer credit...

E.g. In the real estate business I deal a lot with people who have credit problems. One common thing people do is get behind on several accounts and so they do a debt consolidation with the consumer credit people.

Unbelief — They don't believe God will really forgive and forget. This person might say, "I've committed the same sin so many times that I feel embarrassed to come to God about the same matter."

Ignorance — "I'll get back in fellowship when I'm sure I will be able to hold out." What's wrong with this is that it is not "we" who hold out. God is the one who removes the sin. We just keep confessing and keep trying.

In Romans 6-8 we see something that sheds some light on the subject. After discussing in chapter 5 how we are justified by faith because of Christ's work on the cross, Paul asks in chapter 6 if we should sin that grace might increase. The obvious answer is no. Then in chapter 7 he tells us how he struggles to do the right thing and not sin, but he can't control himself.

Notice the most predominant word in chapter 7, especially 7:15-25. It is the word "I." That tells me that Paul couldn't do it on his own. He could not control his old nature.

Notice the topic of chapter 8 and the most predominant word in 8. The topic is power over sin and victorious living. The word "I" is only found once in vs. 18 where Paul says he considers the suffering of this world nothing in comparison to the glory to be revealed, but the word Spirit appears a number of times. What we see is "I" can't do it in chapter 7 but the Spirit can do it in chapter 8.

So don't wait to confess when you think *you* will be able to overcome the sin.

Deception — "I want to enjoy the world first before I settle down to serious commitment to Christ." Deception is a strong word but it fits. When we think this, we have swallowed the lie of Satan that says life will be better without God.

Haven't you all said these things to yourself at one time or another? I know I have.

How hard is it to be cleansed? It is very hard. No, it is not hard for God, it is hard for us because it takes humility.

Let's go back to the foot washing example. Some may be wondering if we are supposed to wash each other's feet in our day. I don't think so. That was a cultural thing and was necessary before you reclined at the table and stuck your dirty feet under someone else's nose. I think the point of 13:15 is that we are to serve others.

But some people do believe we are supposed to do this in the church today and so they hold foot washing ceremonies in the church a few times a year. But do you know what they do?

Before the ceremony everyone does just like you and I would do. Before they come to church they wash their own feet, trim and clean out their toenails. Why? It's one thing to have someone wash your clean feet, but quite another to have someone wash your dirty feet! It is humiliating.

I think we can carry this analogy a little further and correlate it to our spiritual washing.

It is humiliating to come to God and confess our sins. It is a blow to our pride. We have a tendency to want to clean up our act before we ever come to Him and confess. As if He will be more apt to forgive us and accept us if we are working on the problem ourselves.

That is why Christians try to live life on their own without God's help. They are too proud.

In verse 16 Jesus says, "a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him." Jesus seems to needlessly state the obvious, but the disciples were in fact acting like they were the important ones.

Verse 17 reminds us that it is not enough to know these facts — to know that we are to be servants, etc. The goal is that we put our knowledge into practice.

The next section deals with Judas and I want to skip it and move to 13:33.

B. Having a Calm Heart² — Dealing With the Future (13:33-14:7)

Jesus has just given them an example of service, and explained the importance of dealing with the past and being in fellowship with Him.

Now Jesus deals with something else that is foundational for service—hope for the future.

He begins by telling them that He has a new commandment for them. The Greek word means “way of life.” It is not a law that can be legalistically followed. It is an attitude. It is an attitude of love for one another. Again, we could go back to the terms—ministry, instead of manipulation.

Verse 35 says, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” This new way of life will set us apart from the rest of the world, because man’s natural tendency is to love himself and try to manipulate and control his world to meet his own needs.

Notice Peter’s response: verses 36-37. He would rather die than live without Christ. Imagine living with the perfect human being. The thought of losing Him would incapacitate them.

So Jesus reassures them of His return. He gives them a hope for the future. He gives them a calm heart. I think it shows that we can’t concentrate on obeying this “new commandment” of ministering to others until our own fears are relieved, until we are sure of the future.

In John 14:1 Jesus says, “Let not your heart be troubled.” And Christ repeats that in vs. 27. That tells me that what is said in 14: will tell us how to do that.

How does Christ reassure them? He tells them they are going to heaven in 13:36-14:7. It says they will be reunited with Christ, and that is what heaven is all about.

How does knowing this help us now while we are here on earth?

I think the best way to describe that is by way of example of an Air Force academy survival/POW camp. I can make it because it is only 48 hours. It’s not going to be fun, but I can take it because...

Conclusion

Erwin Lutzer writes, “Many people live their lives crucified between two thieves—the regrets of yesterday and the anxieties of tomorrow.”

I think Christ showed them how to wipe out the regrets of yesterday. They were to confess their sins. This would put them in fellowship with Him and give them His power to handle life.

He also relieved them of their anxiety for the future by telling them that He was preparing a place for them and would return for them. This would make life more bearable because they knew it wouldn’t last forever and it gave them something better to look forward to.

I believe these verses tell us how to cope with the trouble in our lives. When we are depressed about life and overwhelmed by something, we need to recognize the sinfulness of our response and confess it. We need to get back in fellowship with Christ. Put Him in control.

We then need to remember that the future holds permanent deliverance and we are only facing these trials for a little while. We need to have the attitude of Paul in Rom 8:18.

And remember the setting is a foot washing. It is a setting of service. All this is not only for our own personal comfort. The ultimate goal is that it will free us up to serve others.